

“What is the Best Thing About You?”
An Exploratory Study of How Young Children Perceive Character Strengths

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Abstract

The study of character strengths is a relatively new area of research within the realm of positive psychology. Character strengths likely develop during childhood and therefore studying young children's capacities for talking about their perceptions of character strengths is important. This thesis sought to use children's voices and conduct an exploratory qualitative study into children's capacity to talk about perceptions of their own and others character strengths. The purpose of the research was two-fold, first, to create a developmentally appropriate methodology for obtaining children's perceptions of character strengths, and second, if children had the capacity to talk about character strengths, to discover how they did so. Seventeen five-and-a-half to six-year-old children participated in individual interviews at their school. After a review of the methodological issues involved with obtaining children's voices in research, four developmentally appropriate strategies utilising a story, puppets, a photo and direct interviewing strategies were created. The four strategies were tested in a pilot study, revised, and then utilised in the main study. The strategies created were found to be developmentally appropriate, and assisted children to varying degrees to talk about their perceptions. At least one character strength was able to be inferred from all children's responses. Affiliation, kindness and self-regulation were the most identified character strengths. Results indicated the children were on the cusp of developing their sense of self and the ability to verbalise their positive internal attributes. Differences in the way children talked about character strengths are discussed in reference to child development and the social nature of character strengths.

Chapter 1

Introduction and Literature Review

Introduction

There is an implicit understanding that one's "character" is important and that "good character" should be promoted, particularly in children. According to the New Zealand Pocket Oxford Dictionary, character refers to, "collective qualities, characteristics that distinguish a person or thing; a moral strength; reputation especially good reputation.". A more psychological definition however, would define character as unique dispositions and internal traits and values, which are revealed in a person's regular behaviour and/or habits.

At face value, character is similar to personality, but it is not synonymous with it, as fundamental differences exist between the two. Definitions of personality are somewhat controversial; however, the main elements of most personality definitions refer to "a set of psychological traits and mechanisms within an individual that are organised and relatively enduring and that influence his or her interactions with, and adaptations to, the environment". Where personality is descriptive, character is prescriptive. Character has moral connotations, and implies an individual's moral qualities and reputation. This is in contrast to personality which is objective and describes a set of characteristics.

An emphasis on character dates back to about 500B.C.. In the west, Greek philosopher Plato (427-347 B.C.) proposed wisdom (*Sarah*), courage (*andreia*), self-restraint (*sôphrosune*) and justice (*dikaisunê*) to be four virtues necessary for an "ideal" city. Aristotle (455-380 B.C.) furthered these ideas and examined the relationship between virtues and happiness (*eudaimonia*). That is, he explored "the good life" and what virtues and values it takes to achieve life satisfaction. In the east, similar themes are found in the writings of Confucius (551-479 B.C.).

The study and promotion of character is now typically known as “character education”. Character education has a long history with almost all literate societies able to be identified as practicing and advocating “good character” in some way . In the 1800s character education was largely based on the Bible’s Ten Commandments and focussed on the promotion of character in the economic and religious domains, obedience, duty to authority and absolute conformity . Character education was at its most popular in the early twentieth century, as an emphasis on forming value structures that promoted socially desirable qualities and virtues became prominent . Character education remained to be taught with a religious basis. The mid 1900s saw a decline in the popularity of character education as education became more secular and the teaching of character education inclusive and uncontroversial . The teaching of “character” in schools all but disappeared as the emphasis shifted to other curriculum areas . The late 1980’s and 1990’s however, saw character education brought back into schools and the curriculum. Presently, in New Zealand many curriculum goals include/incorporate the promotion of values, virtues and character. For example Te Whāriki, The Early Childhood Curriculum, states children should develop skills such as; “the capacity to discuss and negotiate rules, rights, and fairness”; “an ability to take responsibility for their own actions”; “awareness of their own special strengths”, “an increasing ability to take another’s point of view and to empathise with others” .

There is growing concern over how “good character” can be shaped as the incidence of violence and substance abuse increases amongst young people . Shaping and promoting “good character” is believed to be one possible way in which such negative behaviours can be decreased .

The study of positive character or character strengths is associated with the relatively new area of positive psychology. Positive psychology was introduced by Martin

Seligman in 1998, and has emerged within the last decade as a sub-discipline of psychology . Positive psychology can be defined as “the scientific study of ordinary human strengths and virtues” . Positive psychology utilises a “strengths” as opposed to a “deficit-based” model. Strength-based models emphasise individual’s strengths, capabilities and competencies and uses these as a foundation to study and promote healthy, happy development . This is in contrast to the deficit-based approach, which tends to focus on what is wrong, abnormal or missing in an individual . Traditionally psychology has focussed on identifying, diagnosing and treating pathology . For example, the concept of developmental risk (See Table 1) which has been a focus of developmental psychology, falls into this deficit-based approach as it seeks to identify internal and external factors associated with poor developmental outcomes for individuals. In the last three decades, there has been a shift away from focussing on individual deficits towards an emphasis on individual strengths and positive outcomes . There are several constructs that seek to explain positive outcomes in individuals. These various constructs associated with positive outcomes and positive psychology are not mutually exclusive as they involve many of the same protective factors and processes to derive positive outcomes (See Table 1).

Resilience

One such construct is resilience. The shift towards this strength-based model began in the early 1970s, as investigators became increasingly interested in why it was that many people manifest positive social and psychological outcomes in adulthood despite being exposed to developmental adversities . This phenomenon prompted research interest into the factors that enhance developmental resilience. Studies began to examine why it was

that a child who grew up with certain risk factors such as living in a poor neighbourhood with family conflict, parental divorce, and poor academic motivation and achievement, grew up to be happy, healthy, well adapted adults when others with similar backgrounds did not . The concept of resilience was formed in order to help explain such positive adaptations despite major adversity. Research began to be concerned with why some children were able to maintain positive trajectories despite experiencing many negative factors whilst other children did not .

Werner followed 698 children from birth through to age 32 years in Kauai, Hawaii. The researcher identified that 201 children (30%) by the age of two were considered “high risk” for poor developmental outcomes due to exposure to four or more risk factors: reproductive stress, impoverished homes, uneducated, alcoholic or mentally ill parents, divorce, and family conflict. Of these children, 129 (64%) developed learning and behaviour problems, became delinquent, or had mental health problems or pregnancies before the age of 18 years. However, despite growing up with the same risk factors 72 (36%) of the children grew up to be competent adults, succeeding at school, home and in social situations. Researchers compared behavioural and environmental characteristics of all children considered to be high risk and identified factors contributing to the resilience of the 72 children. Factors identified as contributing to these positive outcomes were an easy-going temperament, a high degree of sociability, a tendency to ask for help, an ability to concentrate and problem-solve and the presence of hobbies and close bonds with at least one other person. The resilient children in the study also tended to be well liked by others, have at least one close friend, have high self-esteem and sound values, and finally they had a positive outlook on the future. These factors have become to be known as protective factors.

Protective Factors

Protective factors have been defined as “influences that modify, ameliorate or alter a person’s response to some environmental hazard that predisposes to a maladaptive outcome” . Protective factors have a cumulative effect, in that the more protective factors present in a child’s life the more likely they are to display resilience . Seifer, Sameroff, Baldwin and Baldwin studied 50 high and 102 low risk children aged between 4 and 13 years of age as part of a longitudinal study. Ten risk factors were examined: maternal mental illness, maternal anxiety, 20 or more stressful events in the past four years, low maternal education, parents in semiskilled occupations, absence of a father, four or more children, disadvantaged minority ethnicity, rigid parenting and poor mother-child interactions. Children who were found to have four or more of these risk factors were considered to be high risk. Researchers assessed each child’s cognitive and social-emotional competence, personality dispositions, social support and family cohesion. It was found that protective factors such as; good mother-child interactions, high child perceived competence, positive life events, good social support, high maternal parenting values, and low rates of maternal depression were related to positive social-emotional and cognitive change in the high risk children in the study. Many of these factors were also associated with improvement in the low-risk children.

Developmental Assets

A further construct associated with positive development are developmental assets. The term “developmental assets” refers to a collection of internal and external factors, that promote individual wellbeing and thriving and ultimately lead to positive adulthood . The presence of one or more of these factors is considered an “asset” to develop, because it has been associated with positive developmental outcomes in previous research. The Search Institute has compiled a list of indicators they believe to be important for healthy

development known as the *40 Developmental Assets for Middle Childhood*. This list was compiled after five years of research between 1990 and 1995 with 350,000 6th to 12th grade students (ages 11 to 18 years) in the USA. Students were given a 156 item survey named *The Search Institute Profiles of Student life* which measures developmental assets, high risk behaviours, thriving indicators, developmental deficits and selected demographic variables . A list of 40 internal and external assets was identified from this information, which the Search Institute believes to be qualities essential for raising successful young people . Scales, Benson, Roehlkepartain, Sesma, and van Dulmen investigated the contribution of developmental assets in predicting high academic achievement with adolescents. In this study, 370 students in the 7th to 9th grades (ages 12 to 14 years) were followed for three years to the 10th and 12th grades (ages 15 to 18 years). The *Search Institute Profiles of Student Life: Attitudes and Behaviour Survey* was administered to students over three time periods. The developmental asset items in the survey are measured on a five-point Likert scale. Students were considered to possess a developmental asset if they averaged a four or more for the items for each asset. Information was also collected on each student's Grade Point Average (GPA) to assess academic achievement. The results found that the more assets a student possessed the greater their GPA. That is, those students who reported more assets in the 7th and 9th grades had higher GPA's in the 10th and 12th grades. The developmental assets reflecting connections to community and adherence to norms of responsibility were found to be the most significantly associated with increased GPA. Results revealed that developmental assets in this study were significantly associated to academic "thriving" three years later.

Character Strengths

Following on from developmental assets, literature on character strengths has emerged. Character has been defined as “the moral self” . Character strengths are concerned with “human goodness” and the positive and moral traits that individuals possess which facilitate positive experiences . Character strengths have been defined as “positive traits reflected in thoughts, feelings, and behaviours” that “exist in degrees and can be measured as individual differences” (Park, Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p.603). Character strengths are based on value judgements that lead to well-being, thriving and satisfaction, and, when exhibited as actions, are considered voluntary in that individuals may choose whether or not to display certain strengths . Character strengths involve the positive elements of character, and promote happiness and fulfilment in the self and others

Peterson and Seligman have developed a classification system for identifying character strengths. According to their criteria character strengths are: widely recognised across cultures; contribute to fulfilment, happiness and life satisfaction; are morally valued in their own right; do not diminish others in that they produce admiration and not jealousy; have antonyms that are negative; are “trait-like” in the sense that they are stable and differ between individuals; are measurable; are distinctive; are strikingly resembled in some individuals; are extraordinarily shown by some children and youth; are missing altogether in some individuals; and are the deliberate target of societal practices. Furthermore, character strengths are able to be reflected on and talked about by the self and by others, are separate and distinguishable from talents, abilities and intelligence and exist on a continuum in that individuals can possess more or less of certain strengths.

The study and measurement of character strengths has largely been led by Peterson and Seligman . Peterson and Seligman have identified six core virtues: “wisdom and knowledge”, “courage”, “humanity”, “justice”, “temperance”, and “transcendence”. They argue that these virtues are universal and may be grounded in biology through evolutionary

processes. Cultural variations as to what constitutes “good character” exist . However, Dahlsgaard, Peterson and Seligman have identified that these six virtues are universally recognised in the writings of Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Athenian philosophy, Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

Stemming from the six core virtues are character strengths, which are the ways in which virtues are displayed. For example, the virtue of wisdom may be shown through the character strengths of curiosity, love of learning, open-mindedness, creativity and perspective. Peterson and Seligman have identified 24 character strengths. As maintained by Peterson and Seligman it is the presence and promotion of the 24 character strengths and ultimately the six virtues which will lead to the experience of life satisfaction and fulfilment. To help identify and study character strengths in a standardised way Peterson and Seligman created the *Values in Action (VIA) Classification of Character Strengths*. The *VIA Classification of Character Strengths* (see Appendix 1) contains the 24 character strengths organised around the six core virtues. Definitions of each virtue and character strength are provided in the classification system.

Park, Peterson and Seligman in a study investigating the association between character strengths and life satisfaction surveyed 5,299 adults using the *Values in Action Inventory* (VIA-IS). The *VIA-IS* is a self-report assessment aimed at identifying adult positive character strengths. Participants were asked to rate how much 240 statements such as “I am never too busy to help a friend” were like them on a five-point Likert scale. There were 10 statements for each character strength. Next, participants were asked to complete the *Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS)* (Diener, Emmons, Larsen & Griffin, 1985) a rating of life satisfaction on a five item self-report questionnaire. Park, Peterson and Seligman reported that the strengths of hope, zest, gratitude, love and curiosity were most significantly correlated with life satisfaction and modesty and intellectual strengths least

associated to life satisfaction. They also found that the more intensely a strength was displayed the more life satisfaction an individual experienced . This is one of the first studies into character strengths and the link between character strengths and fulfilment may prove to be important.

The development of moral character

Most studies to date have focussed on adult character strengths. However, character strengths are taught and developed during childhood. Given their potential positive implications, it is important to understand their development.

It is likely that character first develops through interactions with ones environment, culture and society as well as internal characteristics like temperament and personality . “Good character” is acquired through social processes. A child’s environment models appropriate behaviours and emphasises certain values which in turn become internalised shaping a child’s values and ideas of societal rules and regulations . It is often parents and primary caregivers who are the first to introduce children to familial and societal rules and regulations . Parents and caregivers typically model and promote certain behaviours, morals and values. Through exposure to these standards of behaviour and parental and familial values children’s own morals, values and character attributes develop . Parenting styles may also play a part in moral development. It has been argued that an authoritative parenting style may help to cultivate “good character” in children . Authoritative parents are warm, respectful and supportive whilst also placing boundaries, expectations and standards for their children to follow . It is recognised that this style of parenting promotes social responsibility, self-reliance, self-control and general competence in children . The developmental assets literature recognises these factors also, naming them as important external assets to be fostered to help encourage positive development and well-being.

Theories of the development of a moral character

The development of moral character has been explained by several theories.

Piaget's theory assumes two stages of moral development/judgement. The first stage, "morality of constraint", is characterised by rigid, egocentric thinking. Children in this stage are black and white in their thinking, rules must be adhered to and individuals are seen only as "good" or "bad". During this stage, children's beliefs about what is right and wrong are dependent on consequences and avoiding punishment is the primary focus. This stage is said to be consistent with children until about the age of seven years. The second stage of Piaget's theory, "morality of cooperation", is characterised by moral judgement. Rules are not "sacred" but are seen as important for ensuring societal harmony. According to Piaget, the second stage develops as children are exposed to a range of opinions and begin to form their own moral beliefs, they are then able to make more subtle moral judgements. At this stage, their own actions are not solely governed by consequences but by social norms and a system of morality and moral judgements that are based on an improving understanding of others intentions and not solely on consequences.

Kohlberg's theory of moral development proposes that children's experiences help to form their thinking and understanding of concepts related to morality including; justice, civil rights, equality and human welfare. Kohlberg built on Piaget's theory and described three levels of moral reasoning. The first level is "preconventional morality", which describes children aged between four and ten years of age. Children in the stage of "preconventional morality" are characterised by self-interest and rule-following in order to avoid punishment or gain rewards. "Conventional morality" after age 10, is the second level, during which the standards and regulations of authority figures are internalised and the focus becomes doing what is "right" and pleasing others. "Postconventional morality"

is the third level although not all individuals reach this level. This stage, if reached, is typically done so in late adolescence-early adulthood. Individuals at this level are said to be able to make their own moral judgments based on their own principles and can choose between conflicting moral standards (Papalia et al., 2002).

Piaget and Kohlberg's cognitive theories of moral reasoning have received some criticism as they do not necessarily explain how children actually act, for example; it has been noted, that just because an individual is at a higher level than someone else, it does not necessarily follow that they will act more "morally". In addition, Carpendale has pointed out that Kohlberg's theory predicts consistency of moral reasoning beyond what has been observed, in that individuals do not necessarily consistently apply the same moral reasoning to all moral situations.

A more holistic approach may result in a more accurate theory of moral development. Gibbs and Schnell suggest that, in addition to understanding the cognitive foundations of moral character, understanding of social and emotional factors is needed to understand the development not only of moral reasoning but also of moral behaviour. Inclusion of non-cognitive factors of moral character such as empathy, guilt and sympathy and the impact of social contexts, life experiences and internalisation of social norms may help to create a more realistic explanation of moral development.

Self-regulation and moral development

Integral to moral development is self-regulation. Self-regulation, also referred to as self-control, is a fundamental human characteristic and refers to the ability to regulate/control one's behaviour, emotions and thoughts. Learning to ignore one's preferences and impulses and act in appropriate and moral ways is integral to the development of self-regulation. Baumeister and Exline describe four main categories of

self-control, including; impulse control, control over thoughts, affect regulation and optimal performance control, which includes persistence to achieve a goal. Self-regulation develops at a rapid rate in childhood as the shift from external to internal regulation of behaviour develops. Between one and one-and-a-half years of age children have become aware of social demands and have learned some self-control in order to comply with parental requests. By two years of age most children are able to control their own behaviour through inhibiting and regulating their behaviour even in the absence of parents. At three years of age, children moderate their behaviour to meet situational demands. It is believed that self-regulation is an important predictor of the internalisation of social rules, norms and morals.

Kochanska, Murray and Coy studied the association between inhibitory control/self-regulation and the development of conscience/morals by obtaining data from children as toddlers (three years), preschoolers (four years) and again at early school age (five-and-a-half years). A multi-method approach to data collection was utilised in a laboratory setting. Initial observational assessments of inhibitory control in a laboratory setting assessed children's abilities to slow down motor activity, suppress/activate activity, cognitive reflectivity and effortful attention in a series of challenging games. Maternal ratings of inhibitory control were also obtained through the use of the Children's Behaviour Questionnaire. An assessment of the children's conscience/moral development included three aspects. Mother-child interaction was observed during ten minutes of cleaning up after a craft activity to determine "committed compliance". Parents were told to ask their child to clean up and children's compliance to this request was recorded. Second, parents left their child alone in the room with the instructions to finish tidying up. Children's compliance in parent absence was then recorded by observers. Third, children engaged in a rule-based throwing game. Investigators gave each child a series of rules and regulations of how the game should be played before leaving children alone. Children's compliance with

the rules were observed and recorded. Fourth, an investigator asked children to perform a “legal act” such as ripping up a blank piece of paper and an “illegal act” such as drawing on the walls. Children were given a maximum of two prompts to encourage them to engage in these actions, and were coded according to their willingness to violate social standards. Fifth in a test of moral cognition, children were told two sets of four stories. The first set of stories involved characters acting selfishly at the expense of another’s welfare. The second set of stories told of characters who acted self-interestedly instead of in terms of others’ welfare and moral norms. At the completion of stories, children were asked what action protagonists should take and their answers were coded according to moral norms. Children’s moral self was then tested with the use of puppets. Children were shown a video of two puppets making opposing statements and researchers asked children which statement was most like them. Finally children were asked to play a ring toss game in same sex groups of three without adult supervision. Investigators told children of the rules and then left. Children’s actions were then coded according to violations of these rules. Results found inhibitory control increased with age and girls to be more internalised than boys. In addition, mothers of older children rated their child’s inhibitory control higher on the Child Behaviour Checklist. Inhibitory control was also found to be closely associated with the development of moral conduct, moral cognition and moral self at early school age (five-and-a-half years) and that the more inhibitory control observed the better internalised morals and conscience tended to be.

Current Studies of Character Strengths

There are several studies which have examined the character strengths of adolescents and children. In a strengths-based study with adolescents, character was measured with the *Values in Action Inventory of Strengths for Youth (VIA-Youth)*, which is a

modified version of the *VIA-IS*. The *VIA-Youth* is for the use of young people aged 10 to 17, and uses a three-point Likert scale to test the 182 items in the inventory. Park and Peterson surveyed 306 students using the *VIA-Youth*. Results indicated that girls tended to score higher on the strengths of appreciation of beauty, open-mindedness, gratitude, kindness and love. Interpersonal strengths such as love, kindness and social intelligence were highly correlated with subjective well-being. The strength of temperance predicted grades in English, math and science after controlling for ability test scores.

In a New Zealand study, Williams and McGee surveyed self-perceived strengths of 960 adolescents at the age of 15. Parents of the adolescents were asked to describe their child's good points in open-ended questions. A list of 22 "strengths" was then compiled from the parent's comments, and adolescents were asked to indicate which strengths from the list they were most like. Most adolescents responded positively to the character strengths and identified with an average of 14 to 15 strengths on the list. There were differences between the genders, with boys rating their strengths as sport, having hobbies and physical attractiveness. Girls rated themselves as having strengths in reliability, kindness, independence and affection.

Steen, Kachorek and Peterson conducted focus groups with 459 high school students aged between 14 and 19 years. This study utilised female graduate students as "group leaders" who chose four to six character strengths from the *Values in Action Classification of Strengths* for each class to discuss. The "group leader" lead discussions and asked guiding questions such as "how do you know that someone possesses kindness?" or "What makes it hard to be kind?" to prompt conversation. The adolescents in the study were interested in character strengths, and openly discussed their complexities. Discussions revealed the students were able to talk about and understand some of the more abstract character strengths. Furthermore, it was found that the students most valued the character

strengths of leadership, intelligence, wisdom, social intelligence, love of learning and spirituality.

Park and Peterson studied an online sample of 680 written parent descriptions of children aged three to nine years. Parent descriptions were coded according to the *Values in Action Classification of Character Strengths*. If parent descriptions mentioned happiness this was also coded according to the strength of the statement, for example; if the parent described their child as “extremely happy” the child’s happiness was coded as a seven whereas parents whose online descriptions made no mention of happiness were coded as a one. The most commonly included character strengths from parental descriptions were love, curiosity, kindness, creativity and humour. The character strengths most associated with high researcher determined levels of happiness were; love, hope and zest. These findings are consistent with other studies using adult and youth samples .

Specific character strengths found in children such as hope, kindness, social intelligence and self-control are increasingly being recognised as factors that can help to protect against the negative effects of stress and trauma and the occurrence of disorder . Similarly, the strength of optimism has been linked to better adjustment and wellbeing in both children and youth. Ey and colleagues followed 204 children aged between 8 and 11 years at two different time points to determine children’s positive and negative expectations about the future. Participants were given the *Youth Life Orientation Test* a sixteen-item self-report measure of optimism and pessimism. Results showed that children who were identified as being optimistic about the future reported fewer depressive symptoms as well as less parent-reported behaviour problems.

The studies of character strengths in adolescents and adults have provided a useful foundation of information. However, a number of methodological issues has limited studies of the character strengths of children under the age of 10.

Many studies have used parent or teacher report to gain information about children's strengths and character, possibly because of perceptions of difficulties and developmental competence around using child self-report. However the use of "children's voices" in research is valuable and can provide a unique insight into the experiences and lives of children which otherwise would not be obtained . Whilst parent and teacher report as well as behavioural observations are valuable tools for collecting information, it is only by asking children themselves about their thoughts, feelings and perceptions that it is possible to study their point of view, as only the child is the expert when it comes to discussing internal factors .

If young children's voices are to be heard in research then it is integral to understand the development of accuracy in reporting self-perceptions. Bjorklund proposes that children as young as 18 to 24 months have a developed concept of self and are able to distinguish themselves as unique beings. Self-concept can be defined as an "individual's beliefs about himself or herself, including the person's attributes" . According to Bartsch and Wellman children are identified as having a self-concept before the age of seven. However, it may be that children of this age are not able to give sophisticated accounts of their sense of self. Children under seven years tend to describe themselves in terms of concrete/observable behaviours and characteristics. A typical self-description of a child at four-years of age would be specific, positive, observable, and void of any psychological descriptions .

The development of self-observation and self-evaluation between the ages of four and seven occurs in several key stages. At the ages of four to five, children are increasingly able and somewhat preoccupied with observing others. They begin to critically evaluate others' behaviours and conduct and become concerned with the "correctness" of others. Four and five year olds however, do not yet apply such observations to themselves, and are

not aware that others may be evaluating them in the same way that they are evaluating others .

Between the ages of five and six, children understand that others are not only observing but evaluating them also, and begin to be aware of and concerned with others and what they might think of them, and in turn, try to avoid criticism. Due to this new awareness of evaluation by others, children at this age also become preoccupied about making mistakes.

It is, however, not until the child reaches the ages of six and seven that they begin to internalise the negative evaluations of others. At this age, children are beginning to incorporate the observations and evaluations of others into their own self-perceptions. By age seven children are able to accurately evaluate their own performance and recognise their competencies in various areas .

In addition to the development of self-evaluation, younger children have also yet to develop an understanding of more complex emotions such as pride and shame, and will usually be limited to happy, sad, mad and scared as emotional descriptors of themselves .

In considering the place of children's voices in research, language must also be considered. Between the ages of four and five, children's sentences average four to five words and are often strung together by "and then". Comprehension of children at this age is also developing in that if given a two-part sentence for example, "you may watch TV after you pick up your toys" children tend to process the words in the order they were said, and therefore watch TV first before picking up their toys. By the age of five to seven years, speech has become fluent, comprehensible and grammatically correct. At this age however, children have yet to master the more subtle aspects of language and exceptions to rules. By the age of five, most children are also able to be a part of a conversation for about 12 turns. It is also important to note that often children's receptive language is more advanced than

their expressive language ability , so children may be able to understand more about themselves than they are able to express.

Studies utilising children's voices

There are several studies using different methodologies that have used children's voices. In one such study Rotenberg investigated "character constancy" of others with children aged between six and nine. Rotenberg defined "character constancy" as "the belief that others or self's personality characteristics (identity) are stable across time (stability) and do not change despite changes in appearance (constancy)". Children listened to a series of six stories in which characters were depicted as being either "mean" or "nice" and asked to make judgements about the characters based on the stories. The study demonstrated that character constancy increases with age; however, even the youngest children at the age of six were able to accurately identify and judge the characteristics of the protagonist in the stories, as well as use the same types of identification techniques and judgements of their characteristics as older children.

In a second experiment Rotenberg investigated the "character constancy" of self with 62 children aged between five and seven years. As part of this experiment, trait reference was tested by asking children a series of open-ended questions where for example the child was asked, "try and describe you to me, try and tell me what you are like". Second, children were asked to complete sentences, for example, "(child's name) is a boy/girl who..." Results indicated children were able to provide more traits in response to the sentence-completion questions than the open-ended questions. The number of traits children mentioned increased with age in that 19% of five to six year olds, 50% of seven to eight year olds and 81% of nine year olds referred to one or more traits. The most frequent trait identified was kindness followed by playfulness.

Eder studied children's psychological selves by asking children to answer questions about their own and others internal states. Children were asked a series of 48 questions, 12 for each of the following categories; general behaviour for example, "tell me what you usually have done in school", general traits "tell me how you have usually been in school", specific behaviour "Tell me what you did in school today", and specific traits "Tell me how you were in school today". Even the youngest children in the study at three-and-a-half years of age were able to give psychological descriptions when asked, including statements about the inner states and emotions of both themselves and others. In a follow-up study Eder reported similar findings. In this study children aged between three-and-a-half and seven-and-a-half years were individually interviewed using two puppets. Children were asked 50 pairs of opposing statements by the puppets for example, one puppet would say, "I usually play with friends" and the other "I usually play by myself". The experimenter then asked children, "how about you?" Results found all children in the study were able to demonstrate an understanding of dispositional concepts. Furthermore, the youngest children in the study at three-and-a-half were able to give consistent and meaningful responses to questions about themselves.

Heyman and Gelman investigated children's ability to use trait labels as tools for making inferences about mental states. Participants were six, eight, eleven years of age and adults. It was reported that all four age groups used trait labels to predict the characters' mental states. Open-ended and motive questions revealed that the "nice" characters were judged to have more positive motives than the "mean" characters, and that the foreseeability questions showed that all ages were able to coordinate motive with outcome. Heyman and Gelman also reported that even the six-year-old children in the study could link traits to mental states and interpret behaviour relative to trait labels. That is they realised that different people will react differently to the same situation.

Yuill and Pearson studied causal understanding of traits and conceptions of desire as subjective with children aged between three and seven years. Children completed two tasks; the first was a “trait task” where children were read twelve stories depicting six pairs of opposing traits without mentioning the trait label, for example, selfish and generous. Children were then asked to identify the trait depicted in the story. The second activity was a “conceptions of desirability task”. Children were shown dolls acting out a story in which the main character wants to hit one of the other characters with a ball. This “bad motive” is depicted to children by a “think-bubble” attached to the main character’s head. Children are then shown the “bad motive” doll achieving its desire (hitting the other doll). Children are then asked to judge how the main character is now feeling. Results showed that children from all age levels were able to accurately identify the traits portrayed in the stories beyond chance. Older children accurately identified an average of 4.5 traits and the younger children an average of 2.21 traits. Children’s understandings of desires and their understanding of traits were found to be related. Those that were able to understand desires in terms of subjective states were also better able to identify emotions based on traits. Children were said to have a “subjective conception of desire” if they identified that the “bad motive” doll would now be feeling happy after achieving its goal of hitting the other doll. The average age of children who were able to make this distinction was reported to be five-and-a-half years .

One of the first studies investigating young children’s self perceptions via self-report was completed by Harter and Pike who used children as the main informants for determining young children’s perceptions of their competence and social acceptance. Harter and Pike used *The Pictorial Scale of Perceived Competence and Social Acceptance for Young Children (PSPCSA)* as a means of studying children’s self-perceptions. The scale is designed to measure children’s self-reported competence and social acceptance through

the use of pictures, and has four subscales which measure: cognitive competence, physical competence, and peer and maternal acceptance. Each subscale consists of a total of six items. Harter and Pike found children responded positively to the *PSPCSA* and eagerly responded to the pictorial format. Results showed children generally gave positive responses of their perceived competence and social acceptance and could provide reasons for their cognitive and physical competencies. In addition, they found children's judgements to be related to children's actual competence.

Measelle, Ablow, Cowan and Cowan studied young children's views of their academic, social and emotional lives. To do this in a developmentally appropriate way, the *Berkeley Puppet Interview (BPI)* was developed and tested on 97 children aged between four-and-a-half and seven years of age. The *BPI* contains six subscales, two designed to test academic competence and achievement motivation, two scales testing social competence and peer acceptance and finally two symptom related scales that assess depression/anxiety and aggression/hostility. The *BPI* uses hand puppets to help assist the children in expressing their self-perceptions in the various domains to the investigator. Measelle and colleagues found the *BPI* to reliably measure children's self-perceptions as all but one subscale obtained internal consistency of .70 or above across all three years. Boys were found to have a stable academic competence in contrast to girls whose views of their academic competence declined over the three years. Girls scored higher on the depression/anxiety subscale and boys scored higher on the aggression/hostility subscale. It was also reported that achievement motivation, social competence and peer acceptance for both boys and girls in the study became more positive with age. In addition, results found that a child's perceived achievement motivation was associated with higher scores in math and reading in kindergarten and first grade.

Marsh, Craven and Debus tested a new measure for assessing self-concept in children younger than 8 years of age by interviewing 501 children aged between five and seven years of age using the *Self Description Questionnaire I (SDQ-I)*. The *SDQ-I* is designed to assess the areas of academic self-concept in maths, reading and general academic self-concept in addition to self-perceptions in the non-academic areas of physical ability, physical appearance, peer and parent relationships and general self-concept. The 64 items of the *SDQ-I* were individually administered to participants. Questions were presented in a declarative format for example “I can run really fast”. Children were trained to respond either “yes” or “no” to questions and then asked a follow-up question as to whether they meant “yes/no always” or “yes/no sometimes”. Two weeks after the individual interviews the *SDQ-I* was administered again in a group format with all six and seven year old participants. The group-administration procedure involved a researcher reading aloud the items of the *SDQ-I* and children responding to items on individual questionnaires. Responses were recorded on a five-point Likert scale. Marsh and Colleagues found the *SDQ-I* to be more effective when administered individually as opposed to in groups. In addition, they reported items at the end of the *SDQ-I* were the most effective especially for the younger children in the study.

Marsh, Ellis and Craven created a modified version of the *Self-Description Questionnaire (SDQ-I)* for use with younger children named the *Self-Description Questionnaire for Preschoolers (SDQP)*. Like the *SDQ-I* the *SDQP* measures the areas of academic self-concept (verbal and math) and four areas of non-academic self-concept (Physical, appearance, peers and parent relationships). Marsh and colleagues reported academic achievement to be significantly and positively correlated with academic self-concept indicating children are able to separate these two areas. Girls were also found to have higher appearance self-concepts than boys, whereas boys’ physical self-concept was

found to increase with age. Marsh and Colleagues report their findings indicate that children aged between four and five years of age are able to distinguish between multiple dimensions of self-concept, and when asked in a developmentally appropriate way, are able to report on their self-perceptions.

Dockett and Perry interviewed 300 five-year-old children to find out what they thought was important when starting school. Interviews were conducted in small groups in a school setting. Responses from interviews indicated children emphasised a variety of issues they believed to be important when first starting school but children predominantly emphasised the importance of friends.

There is growing evidence that young children have been underestimated and can make evaluative self-descriptions at a young age . When developmentally appropriate methods for gaining children's self-descriptions are used, children as young as three-and-a-half years of age have been reported to be able to give accurate and reliable descriptions of their self-perceptions .

Previous research suggests that when assessed in developmentally appropriate ways, children as young as three-and-a-half years may have the capacity to understand and describe traits and be beginning to develop a self-concept that they can talk about.

This study was designed to develop a methodology that avoids some of the problems identified, and which contributes to understandings of children's concepts of character strengths.

The first aim of this research is to create a new methodology utilising a variety of strategies that will be appropriate and useful for studying five-and-a-half to six-year-old children's perceptions of character strengths. This will be based on a review of the literature, a pilot test, and then used in a research study. The second objective is to utilise

the newly created measures to explore the capacity for young children to talk about their own and others character strengths.

The age of approximately five-and-a-half to six years of age has been selected for this study as it is at this age that children in New Zealand are in their first year of formal schooling. This is a particularly turbulent and challenging time for children as they begin to form relationships with peers and teachers and often for the first time are subject to peer rejection and social and academic comparison with other children . Research with children of this age can also contribute to understanding some of the developmental changes reported by other researchers.

Thesis Structure

Chapter Two reviews current methodologies for studying children's self-perceptions. Current measures for assessing children's self-perceptions will be examined and their strengths, weaknesses and developmental appropriateness with young children critiqued.

Chapter Three incorporates information from the review of previous research to create a new qualitative and exploratory methodology and research strategies. These are designed to offset some of the problems associated with past measures to specifically assess children's character strengths. These new measures will then be tested in an initial pilot study. The results from the pilot study will then be discussed and refinements to the measures will be explained.

Chapter Four will present the methodology of the main study using the refined measures.

Chapter Five will use the children's responses to interview questions to evaluate the appropriateness and effectiveness of the methodology. This will look specifically at the

measures used, the questions asked and whether or not these were effective in helping children to discuss character strengths.

Chapter Six will present the findings of the main study. The capacity for children to talk about character strengths, any character strengths that are identified in children's responses and the way in which these are referred to by the children will be then be presented.

A discussion of the study will be made in Chapter Seven. A summary of the findings will be presented and the way in which children talked about character strengths will be discussed with specific reference to child development and societal influences. The overall strengths and limitations of the study, suggestions for future research will be discussed and general conclusions will be made.

Chapter 2

Methodological Considerations when using Children's Self-Reports in Research

Introduction

There is currently no one agreed upon way in which to study children's self-concepts by way of self-report. There are several instruments using different methodologies, which have been created to assess children's self-concepts by way of self-report. Researchers have created structured questionnaires, structured individual interviews, some researchers have used puppets or dolls to act out scenarios followed by structured questions and finally researchers have read stories followed by questions and answers. Examples of research utilising children's self-report and the issues involved with such methodologies will now be discussed.

The Pictorial Scale of Perceived Competence and Social Acceptance for Young Children

Harter and Pike's *Pictorial Scale of Perceived Competence and Social Acceptance for Young Children (PSPCSA)* was one of the first instruments assessing young children's self-perceptions via self-report. The *PSPCSA* utilises a pictorial format. Picture plates are used as an aid for responding; there are separate pictures for boys and girls so that each picture shown is the same gender as the child being assessed. Each item has two separate pictures of a child engaging in an activity, for example, doing a puzzle. Activities are counterbalanced so three pictures show a competent child on the left hand side, and three pictures show a competent child on the right hand side. The child is read a statement about each picture such as; "The girl/boy on the right is good at doing puzzles, but the girl on the left is not very good at puzzles – which one is most like you?" After deciding which picture they are most like, the child is asked whether they are "a lot like the girl/boy in the picture or just a little like them?" This answer is aided by two circles, a large circle to indicate that

the child is a lot like the picture, or the little circle if they think they are only a little like the child in the picture (see Figure 1). The *PSPCSA* was believed to be one of the strongest measures of self-concept available at the time. Results from Harter and Pike's study have not been replicated. Fantuzzo, McDermott, Holliday Manz, Hampton and Alvarez Burdick have made the comment that the format of the measure is not developmentally appropriate for younger children and that the use of opposites in the pictures and the verbal explanations given to young children is confusing for them and therefore inhibits their responses. In addition to the questionable appropriateness of the format, the scale itself has been found to lack sufficient validity and reliability .

The Berkeley Puppet Interview

Measelle and colleagues developed the *Berkeley Puppet Interview (BPI)*. The *BPI* uses hand puppets to help assist children in expressing their self-perceptions to the investigator. Two identical puppets with similar sounding asexual names are used. The investigator asks the children several questions with two opposite answers for the child to respond to, one negative and one positive choice. For example, one puppet would say to the child "I'm good at making friends" whilst the other puppet would say, "I'm not very good at making friends". The child is then asked to point to or say which puppet is most like them. The two puppets alternate between positive and negative statements so that children do not begin to identify more with one of the puppets. The *BPI* uses this form of responding in order to reduce socially desirable responses. By giving a child a choice between two statements, a child will not feel like there is a right and a wrong answer, and will give the answer they think is most like them and not what they think the examiner will want to hear. The use of puppets is considered developmentally appropriate to help young children to relate to the interviewer (puppet) and enables children who might otherwise be unable to

talk, to openly discuss topics and be actively engaged even when discussing potentially anxiety provoking areas . Measelle and colleagues state that the format of the *BPI* maximises a child's comprehension of items whilst at the same time minimising socially desirable and forced choice responding. However, the question format used by the *BPI* is not as appropriate or reliable as the use of puppets because the format only gives the child a chance to respond to either a positive or negative statement, children have no opportunity to respond non-specifically or give an alternate answer. Children are forced to choose between whether they are or are not like the puppet. Finally the children at the ages this instrument is designed to test (4 ½ to 7 ½ year olds) will generally know that being able to make friends is more desirable than not being good at making new friends and therefore, the child will be more likely to respond positively to statements about themselves.

The Self-Description Questionnaire for Preschoolers

The *Self-Description Questionnaire for Preschoolers (SDQP)* was developed by Marsh and colleagues to combat some of the problems associated with other measures. The items of the *SDQP* are presented to children verbally in an open-ended style question "Can you run really fast?" rather than a declarative format. Children however are trained to respond either "yes" or "no" to questions and then are asked a follow-up question as to whether they mean "yes/no always" or "yes/no sometimes". The *SDQP* does not use any aids to elicit information from children. A simple direct verbal interview methodology is used for administering the *SDQP* to children. The *SDQP* uses an open-ended style of interview which can eliminate the problems associated with forced-choice questions, and creates the opportunity for children to respond to questions in any way they like. However, the *SDQP*, whilst utilising an open-ended question style, uses a binary response system. In this system, children are specifically trained to respond to the open-ended questions by

answering only “yes” or “no”. This, therefore, results again in forced choice responding, eliminating the opportunity for children to respond to questions freely. Mauthner has suggested that using an individual interview format with children of this age without any props or aids may make children feel somewhat intimidated and uncomfortable and their responses may be somewhat limited to “yes”, “no” or “I don’t know” or the child may even remain silent.

The use of Stories

Rotenberg used stories to obtain children’s voices. In this study children listened to a series of six stories in which characters were depicted as being either “mean” or “nice”. Children were then asked to make judgements about the character as to their level of “mean” or “kindness”, how they would judge the character at a future date, such as “in six days time” to test the stability of their judgements and finally they were shown the character from the story in a different set of clothes and asked to judge whether the character was now “mean” or nice”.

In another study utilising stories Heyman and Gelman read participants six stories about characters that were again described as being either “mean” or “nice”. The character (agent) of each story was described as behaving in a certain way ultimately resulting in either a positive or negative emotional outcome for another character (the patient) in the story. Six types of questions were asked to participants immediately following each story. Open-ended questions to ask why participants thought the agent did an action; motive questions asking whether the agent meant to make the patient happy or upset, foreseeability questions asked participants whether the agent knew the what the patients reaction would be, and finally emotional response questions which asked participants to indicate how the agent felt about what happened to the patient.

The use of stories to help children express their self-perceptions indirectly is more informal than an interview and is more familiar to a child, as at this young age children are learning to read and therefore using books and their pictures frequently to determine meaning.

General Limitations of Current Methodologies

There are several recurring general limitations to instruments that currently exist to obtain children's voices in research. All studies to date utilise a quantitative research methodology, resulting in forced choice responding. This method makes children's responses easy to classify and therefore analyse, however, it does not give children the opportunity to speak for themselves and give their self-perceptions in their own words. Second, studies do not obtain information as to the children's current language levels. If language levels are not assessed it is hard to ascertain whether questions are understood by children as well as whether children's responses are inhibited by their current expressive language abilities. Another limitation of many of the studies is the bias towards socially desirable responding. By using forced-choice formats it is unclear whether children are answering according to their own thoughts or whether they are answering in accordance with what they think researchers would want to hear or what they know to be the "right" answer. The child development literature also recognises that young children tend to describe themselves positively and typically do not make negative self-statements. Many of the studies described do not control for this tendency. This may result in findings that are biased towards the positive and not reflective of children's actual competencies. The study of character strengths with children however, is easier to study as instruments are designed to assess positive aspects of children.

Whilst research suggests that even young children are able to give valid and reliable accounts of their self-perceptions, the way in which young children's voices are obtained in research is of utmost importance. Young children under the age of five years in particular, are susceptible to suggestibility. This means they can be easily swayed to believe something they otherwise would not, and can even be made to remember events that never happened. Furthermore, just by being interviewed by an adult affects the way in which children will answer and interpret questions. Several strategies have been employed by previous studies to combat the difficulties faced when interviewing children. Mauthner suggests that individual interviews are inappropriate and awkward for children under the age of six years, and responses because of this tend to be limited. To decrease the level of uncomfortableness and formality produced by one-on-one interviews with younger children, it is recommended that children be interviewed in small groups, in a casual setting, with the use of props and/or in a way that is conversational, active and puts the child in the role of "expert".

Parkinson used the premise that children know more about themselves than a researcher in a study designed to investigate children's self-perceptions of a "pen-pal project". In accordance with this, Parkinson incorporated multiple strategies to interview children aged between five and six years of age. First, children were interviewed in small groups to encourage discussion and to promote comfort as children spend most of their school day with others. Groups consisted of four children, with two girls, and two boys in each group. The children were given a choice of where the interview would take place and asked to choose where they thought the best place would be. Timing was also a factor as it was deemed counterproductive to conduct interviews when the children would prefer to be doing something else and feel as though they were missing out. To combat this, children were also asked when they would like to do the interviews. During interviews, activities

were used so that the children were cognitively as well as verbally engaged. Children were given paper and coloured pencils and asked to draw a picture of their pen pal doing something with them during the interview. Interviewers also approached discussions by acting ignorant, making the children the experts. Questions such as “please help me to understand” and “tell me what you think” were used to empower the children and make them the teachers. Lastly, it was acknowledged that children at this young age are concrete learners, and therefore, are not able to understand and respond to abstract questions, so all questions were basic and concrete so that examples could be given.

Analysis of the videotaped interviews revealed that the strategies were effective. The five and six year old children appeared to be willing participants and eager to voice their opinions. Children were observed to be comfortable, relaxed and attentive during interviews. The use of small groups triggered ideas among the children and generated ideas and thoughts that probably would not have surfaced had interviews been one on one. Parkinson also observed that most children rarely looked up from drawing, yet continued to participate in the interview. That is, the use of an “active” interview style meant that children were comfortable and not self-conscious as by being able to draw whilst conversing gave the children somewhere to look other than each other and the interviewer and meant the children did not feel as exposed or vulnerable, so were more willing and able to participate.

Whilst there is support for the use of various techniques during interviews with young children, there are also negative factors that need to be considered. The use of toys and other active activities during interviews can distract children just as easily as they can help to facilitate children’s answers. Wilson and Powell discuss that some children may be unable to keep focussed on the task at hand if given something else to do during interviews. Marsh and colleagues reported that the use of pictures to elicit responses in a study about

young children's self-concept was more confusing to children than the simple verbal presentations given alongside them. In contrast to Parkinson Marsh and colleagues found that individual interviews using the *SDQ-I* with children resulted in the most valuable information and were most developmentally appropriate with younger children when compared to the group administered *SDQ-I*. They report that younger children were less able to cope with the group-administered *SDQ-I*, and therefore, performed poorer when compared to their individual interview scores. There is also reason to suggest that children's responses may differ in a group situation also, that is, children may feel they should say certain things due to the presence of others in the group. Individual children may also do most of the talking, letting more shy and quiet children fade into the background. There is also the problem that it is harder to record responses and harder to maintain control of children. However, multiple strategies can be useful.

Interviewing young children requires methodological considerations to be made. Conducting interviews in familiar settings in an informal way and utilising multiple developmentally appropriate strategies such as, stories and puppets may help children to talk about their self-perceptions in meaningful ways and result in the richest information.

Chapter 3

Methodology

Pilot study: Is there a methodology for facilitating five -and-a-half to six-year-old children to talk about their own and others character strengths?

Great care was taken in the construction of a new methodology to study children's perceptions of the character strengths of themselves and others in individual interviews. Given the limitations of previous measures, four new strategies utilising different techniques were created to offset some of the problems associated with previous measures (see Appendix 2 for pilot study interview protocol).

Pilot Study Strategies

Introduction

Prior to interviews, each child was introduced to the researcher, and engaged in general conversation. Following this, the interview procedure was explained to each child, and they were told that they did not have to answer any questions if they did not want to and that they could rejoin their class at anytime (see Appendix 2).

Roy the Rabbit Story

The first interview strategy was designed to put children at ease by beginning with a format with which they were comfortable. A four-page story about "Roy the Responsible Rabbit" (See Figure 2 for an example page) was selected. The story is about Roy who plants carrot seeds and has to look after them and wait for them to grow into carrots. The story is readily accessible via the Internet at <http://www.lsuagcenter.com/4hcritters/Roy1.html>, and is a part of the Character Critters

Program designed by the Louisiana State University Agricultural Center . The Character Critters Program aims to increase both parent and child awareness of positive character traits through the use of age-appropriate stories . In the story chosen for this study, Roy, the main character displays various character strengths such as; kindness, perseverance, trustworthiness, patience, helpfulness and responsibility.

Dockett, Whitton and Perry report that the use of stories in research with younger children can be particularly useful as the stories help to create a relaxed environment for children and can be useful tools for encouraging conversations/discussions about certain topics. Stories have been used by Dockett and Perry to help identify what children feel about starting school and by Rotenberg to measure young children's understandings of "character constancy". Mauthner comments that reading books have also been found to be useful for helping young children to focus on particular topics.

A story is being used in this study as a means of focussing children's attention on the story and indirectly asking about character strengths. Children are given a context (the story) in which to base their answers; this provides an opportunity to identify whether children are able to recognise the character strengths of others in an indirect way. Furthermore, stories are familiar to children of this age, so it serves a secondary purpose of creating a comfortable and familiar environment for children right from the beginning of interviews.

Toy Scenario

The second strategy utilises toys to act out a short scenario. The scenario is acted out by two teddy bears with the non-gender-specific names of "Miggy Bear" and "Yoji Bear". Miggy Bear is a larger shaggy haired teddy bear and Yoji Bear a small teddy bear (see Figure 3). Miggy Bear acts out the borrowing of Yoji Bear's favourite pencil without

asking. Children are then shown Yoji Bear looking for its pencil and being unable to find it. Next, children are shown Miggy Bear noticing Yoji Bear looking for the favourite pencil (see Appendix 2).

This scenario has been adapted from the *Berkeley Puppet Interview (BPI)*. In the *BPI*, puppets are used to present two opposing statements to children and children are then asked to choose which puppet they are most like. In contrast to the *BPI*, children in this study will be asked an open-ended question so that they may choose how they would like to answer questions.

Irwin purports the use of puppets and toys in both research and therapy is a useful and appropriate tool for getting young children to talk about things they otherwise would not. The use of these props encourages a make-believe and imaginary world, which is familiar to a younger child and enables them to feel comfortable in opening up to an unfamiliar interviewer. It is hoped the use of toys in this second activity will be a developmentally appropriate way of asking children indirectly about their perceptions of the morally based character strengths and be an important step in the sequence of developing a rapport with each child.

First Day of School Photo

The third strategy is less structured than the previous two, however, still only requests for children's perceptions of strengths in an indirect manner. A photograph showing a group of smiling school children will be shown to children (see Figure 4). Harter and Pike report that the use of visual aids in interviews with children has been found to be particularly useful as they provide concrete images of contexts and activities to children who might otherwise be unable to understand. Children in this study will be shown the photograph of young children and told that the children in the photo are about to start their

first day of school. In New Zealand, all children start school on their fifth birthday, and this is a big event in the culture of the country. The use of a photograph in this third strategy is designed to be more “real” than the Roy the Rabbit Story and the Toy Scenario. It shows real children, in a situation that the children in the study can identify with. It is hoped that by using a photo as an aid children will project their own thoughts, feelings and experiences about their first day of school into their responses. Furthermore, using a photograph as an aid may help children to understand the question being asked of them, as it gives a context from which to base their answer. Using pictures also gives children something and somewhere to look at other than the interviewer, which may help to make a child feel more comfortable, and decrease the formality of a one-on-one interview. The questions asked to children based on the photo were adapted from Dockett and Perry who asked five year old children who had just started school, “What would you tell a new child about starting school?” and “What do they need to know?” in group discussions.

Semi-Structured Interview

The fourth and final measure is a direct interview. Children are asked a series of structured and unstructured questions in a developmentally appropriate way about their character strengths. These questions are asked without the use of props or visual aids. Previous research utilising interviews with younger children do not typically ask questions outright to children. It is hoped that in this study the measures used before this direct interview will help cue the child to talk about the internal attributes and strengths of themselves and others. The interview was scheduled as the last activity as it is the most unstructured, and most demanding of all the measures.

Pilot Study of the Strategies

The pilot study was preceded by an application to the University of Canterbury Human Ethics Committee, which was approved. This procedure is explained in detail in Chapter 4.

An initial pilot study was conducted to test the appropriateness and effectiveness of the newly created strategies due to the exploratory nature of this research.

Four children, two boys, and two girls took part in this pilot study. These children were Gemma , aged five years, seven months; Harry, aged five years, four months; Jade, aged five years, five months; and Wylie aged five years, four months.

Pilot Study Procedures

The strategies were completed sequentially starting with an introduction, followed by the Roy the Rabbit Story, Toy Scenario, First Day of School Photo and Semi-Structured Interview.

Results of the Pilot Study

Children's responses to questions in the pilot study were analysed according to the way in which children responded to questions. Questions were deemed appropriate if children were first able to answer questions and second, if they did so in the way in which each question intended.

Roy the Rabbit Story

All children's names in this thesis are pseudonyms

Children in the pilot study appeared to enjoy the story. They were attentive and animated whilst having it read to them. Jade told me that she had planted vegetables in their garden with her mother before.

The first question was “What did Roy do in the story that you liked?” This question was appropriate for all four of the children in the pilot study as they were all able to say something about the story that they liked:

Gemma: “Roy shared his carrots.”

Harry: “Picks the carrots.”

Jade: “Kept watching it.”

Wylie: “He thought he couldn’t do it, but then he waited for a week and he could pick them.”

Children’s answers might be considered somewhat limited to Roy’s actions due to the wording of the question “what did Roy *do*”. This type of question however, does show some potential. For example, Jade’s response that she liked that Roy “kept watching” the carrots for example indicates some reference to the strength of perseverance and Gemma’s response that Roy shares the carrots could be interpreted as the character strength of kindness. Three of the four children were then asked a follow-up question asking why they liked that Roy did whatever it was they said in their answer to question one. All children answered this question inaccurately responding according to why it was good for *Roy* to do what he did, instead of responding why they *themselves* liked it. For example when Harry was asked why he liked that Roy picked the carrots he answered:

Harry: “Because he wanted to have carrots for dinner tonight.”

The way children responded to this follow-up question indicated that it may not have been appropriate, and that children when asked questions about an event in a book might be more inclined to give comprehension based answers, rather than their own thoughts and feelings.

The next follow-up question was “What are the good things about Roy?” Gemma and Wylie answered this question based on the internal traits of Roy:

Gemma: “He was very kind.”

Wylie: “He was good and caring about food.”

And therefore, this question was appropriate for them. In contrast, this question was not appropriate for Jade and Harry who were unable to respond according to Roy’s internal traits:

Harry: “He washes the carrots.”

Jade: “He did what his mother told him.”

Despite the problems of Harry and Jade, this question appears to have the potential to uncover children’s perceptions of Roy’s character strengths. Changing the wording of the question to emphasise the internal attributes of Roy and not his actions may result in appropriate responses from more children.

Toy Scenario

The Toy Scenario was well received by children. They liked the teddy bears and wanted to play with them. Children were attentive during the scenario; however, it is unclear as to whether they understood the scenario.

Children were shown Miggy Bear taking Yoji Bear’s pencil and then after watching Yoji Bear looking for it asked, “What is Miggy Bear going to do?” Three children were able to give an appropriate answer to this question:

Gemma: “Give him [Yoji] the pencil back.”

Harry: “Give it to him [Yoji].”

Jade: “Give it back [to Yoji].”

This indicated that the question evoked appropriate responses as the children’s indicated an understanding of the scenario. This question was not appropriate for Wylie

Wylie: “[Miggy is] gonna hide the pencil.”

This answer indicates that Wylie either did not understand the scenario or was not able to predict the actions of the teddy bear. This is a limitation of the question.

Harry and Jade were asked the follow-up question, “Why is Miggy Bear going to give the pencil back?” and responded similarly:

Jade: “Because he wanted to do some writing.”

Harry: “Because he wants to do writing.”
(*Points to Yoji Bear*)

As with the previous question, this question did not appropriately evoke a description of internal states, instead it evoked a concrete response based on actions and motives.

Three children were asked “What else could Miggy Bear have done?” and all children indicated a positive alternative action:

Gemma: “He could have asked first.”

Jade: “Given it back and gotten another pencil
from that bear.”
(*Points to Yoji*)

Wylie: “He could have asked, then Yoji could
have it for a short time and Miggy could
have it for a short time. Then they could
take turns.”

This question was appropriate for these children as they were able to give viable alternate actions.

First Day of School Photo

The children reacted positively to the First Day of School Photo. However, children's responses may have been biased by the fact the children shown in the photo were happy, attractive and well dressed.

All children were able to answer the question "What would you tell these children about starting school?"

Gemma: "It's very nice."

Harry: "What you would do at school and I will play with you."

Jade: "They can't go on their own."

Wylie: "That people will take care of them."

The children were able to respond to this question. From Harry and Wylie's responses, the character strengths of friendliness and kindness may be able to be implied. This question may be useful for eliciting information about character strengths.

All children were also asked with reference to the photo children, "What do they need to know?"

Gemma: "To be quiet on the mat, put their hand up, help their friends."

Harry: "What the teacher asks them to do."

Jade: "They need to listen."

Wylie: "What to do."

This question was able to be answered appropriately by all children, and may help us understand children's perceptions of character strengths such as kindness and self-regulation. This question may have potential for informing about children's character strengths also.

Three of the children were asked the follow-up question “What can you do to get along with these children?”

Gemma: “Keep them safe.”

Harry: “Get to know them.”

Wylie: “Being nice and not bullies.”

These responses show that children were able to answer this question appropriately. This question may also be useful for helping draw out children’s character strengths such as friendliness and kindness.

Semi-Structured Interview

The interview was completed side by side and children were told that this time they would just be asked some questions. I focussed on my notes and not directly on the child in order to make them more comfortable. Children were able to respond to these direct questions and remained attentive and responsive. Children responded to the question “What are the best things about you?” by saying the best things about themselves were:

Gemma: “I’m very kind, I listen to [my teacher],
I’ve learnt to do the monkey bars.”

Harry: “I do stuff the teacher asks me to do.”

Jade: “I go to school and I went to Kaikoura and
the hot pool. I’m not scared of going under
the water. And I went down the lizard and
the other slide.”

Wylie: “Take care of people; when a boy makes a
girl cry I try to stop it; I like being nice; I
like making friends.”

Of all the questions asked, this was the most successful for getting the children to talk about their own character strengths. This success might have been due to the sequence of the activities.

Three children were asked, “What are the best things about others” and answered:

Gemma: “They are nice to me.”

Harry: “They do stuff if they’re told.”

Wylie: “Basically, I just like to have a happy family and have lots of friends. If I hurt someone else, I’ll tell on them. It makes my family really happy to have lots of friends. Basically, I just like to have a happy family and have lots of friends.”

This question appeared to be appropriate for Gemma and Harry. Wylie however, appeared not to answer the question and instead appeared to be continuing his answer to the previous question. This question however, may be appropriate for revealing children’s perceptions of the character strengths of others.

Revision of the Strategies

The pilot study was an important step in the creation of a developmentally appropriate and effective methodology for assessing children’s perceptions of character strengths. After conducting the pilot study, it was deemed necessary to refine some of the measures and interview questions. These changes were made in order to improve the responses children give to questions and ultimately improve the opportunity to learn from the children (see Appendix 3 for changes made to strategies and questions and their rationale).

One major change that has been made to all measures is the number of set questions that is asked to children. Instead of being asked just one question for each strategy, children are instead asked a series of structured questions, followed by unstructured follow-up questions. This change has been made to enable questions to follow on from each other and from strategy to strategy, which possibly gives children more opportunities to mention

character strengths. Second, all children are asked the same set questions, although follow-up questions may vary. This results in a more standardised interview.

The pilot study also revealed a need to aid children to think about internal characteristics which may scaffold them to mention character strengths. To help children to focus on the internal characteristics of the characters portrayed in the measures thought bubbles were employed (see Figure 5). Thought bubbles were used by Yuill and Pearson who found them to be a successful way of helping young children to understand the thoughts of a main character. In this current study thought bubbles are utilised in various questions to assist children to think about internal attributes.

Roy the Rabbit Story

No changes were made to the story itself as children in the pilot study seemed to respond well to the characters and content of “*Roy the Responsible Rabbit*” . Several changes were made to the questions asked following the story (see Appendix 3). In order to ensure children understood the story, and therefore ,were able to answer questions based on an accurate understanding, a comprehension question was created. Children were instead asked immediately following the story to retell its events. It is hoped that by adding this question, the suitability of the Roy the Rabbit Story can be determined and the answers children gave to questions better understood.

Changes were also made to the questions asked following the story to emphasise the internal characteristics of Roy rather than his external actions. This was done in the hopes of guiding children’s answers to reveal their perceptions of internal attributes and ultimately character strengths. In addition, for several questions, thought bubbles were placed next to the appropriate pictures of the book and children were asked what Roy was “thinking” at various points in the story.

Toy Scenario

Many changes were made to the Toy Scenario after the completion of the pilot study (see Appendix 3). Children did not appear to understand the scenario, and their answers to the questions reflected that perhaps the questions used were not appropriately assessing character strengths and were more reflecting children's understandings of socially acceptable/desirable behaviours, or their own ideas about "borrowing" and "sharing".

In order to improve this measure, the teddy bears were replaced with two puppets. This is so the scenario can be acted out more easily. To reflect this change the name of the strategy was also modified to *Puppet Scenario*. Two puppets with distinctive features were selected. The puppets were given the unfamiliar names of "Quackers" and "Bunnykins". Quackers is a yellow duck and Bunnykins a brown rabbit (see Figure 6). The puppets look completely different so the children will be better able to distinguish between the two characters, which will help them to follow the scenario with greater ease. Because one of the puppets is a rabbit, and a rabbit has also been used in the first measure with the story, the rabbit was referred to as a bunny so as to distinguish it as separate from Roy the Rabbit.

In addition to a change with the toys, changes to the actual script were made. In order to make the scenario more understandable and to reduce potential verbal cues, puppets acted out the scenario without talking rather than the researcher explaining the scenario whilst manipulating the toys (see Appendix 3). Next, several comprehension-based questions were added. The first asked children if they could remember the names of the characters and the second asked children to explain what happened in the scenario. These questions were added in order to identify whether a child can differentiate between the two characters and therefore follow the scenario. The second question is to distinguish whether

the children have understood the scenario itself, which will help to understand the answers they give to the questions designed to probe understandings of character strengths.

The scenario has also been simplified so that the characters will now act out much more of the scenario. It is hoped that by simplifying the scenario and making the character's actions more explicit, children will be better able to follow the scenario, and in turn, better able to answer the questions based on it. The scenario has also been simplified so that it is clear the pencil was stolen rather than borrowed without asking.

The questions asked following the scenario have also been redeveloped to potentially provide better information about children's understandings of character strengths. To help children focus on internal attributes thought bubbles were used, and placed next to the puppet that the question was being asked about.

First Day of School Photo

Fundamental changes to the First Day of School Photo strategy have been made. Two new photos were sourced from Google Images (www.googleimages.com) and downloaded to replace the photo used in the pilot study. One of the new photos shows a boy and the other shows a picture of a girl, both of these children are around the same age as the children in the study, are ordinary looking, with basic clothing and have anxious/apprehensive facial expressions (see Figure 7). This is in contrast to the photo used in the pilot study, which showed a group of happy, well dressed and good-looking children. Children were shown the photo of the child the same gender as themselves, so they may be better able to identify with the photo. It is hoped that by changing this photo to a more appropriate one, children's answers to questions based on it will not be biased by the happy faces, or the way the children look. Studies have shown that children and adolescents are more likely to perceive attractive children as more popular, and therefore, tend to be better

liked by their peers. Furthermore, it is hoped that by having gender-specific individual children, with apprehensive looks on their faces, children will be more likely to project their own thoughts and feelings about starting school into the answers they give. It is hoped this will reduce socially desirable responding and any potential bias that may have been created by the attractive, well-dressed children in the photo shown in the pilot study.

The two questions based on the photo have not changed. These questions were found to be effective in the pilot study and therefore will remain unchanged. Several new set questions have been added and minor changes have been made to the types of follow-up questions that may be asked to children (see Appendix 3).

Semi-Structured Interview

The final interview strategy remained mostly unchanged. The only modification to the interview was to change the first question from plural to singular so children were only asked to name one “best thing” about themselves as opposed to the “best things”. This change was made so that children need only think of one thing at a time; follow-up questions were then used to ask children for further information. Some minor changes to the follow-up questions were also made (see Appendix 3). No changes to the main question asked in the interview were made, as this question was found to be the most successful for drawing out character-strength-based answers from the children in the pilot study.

Chapter 4

Methodology

The Main Study

Research Design

This research is exploratory and utilises a qualitative research design to begin an initial investigation into children's self-perceived character strengths. Standardised open-ended interviews were conducted with a small sample of children. In standardised interviews all children answer the same questions allowing comparisons of responses to be made, and instruments used to be reviewed. Open-ended questions were utilised as they provide unique information into participant's perspectives that other methods do not allow. As the study of children's perceptions of character strengths is in its infancy, no theory as yet exists as to the way in which children make sense of and talk about character strengths at a young age. This study therefore utilises current theoretical points of view and research from the child development literature, in particular from the areas of development of self-understanding and theory of mind to guide the development of an appropriate methodology to study children's self-perceived character strengths. This study makes use of content analysis which is a "close inspection of text to understand themes or perspectives" and discourse analysis which "identifies meanings that undergrid normative ways of conceptualising and discussing phenomena" to help guide and analyse data collected from this exploratory research study. It is hoped that from this initial exploration into children's character strengths a description of how children talk about strengths can be created, and from this it is hoped future research can begin to form a theory as to how the development of character strengths in young children comes about.

This current study is nested in a larger study, namely the Academic Achievement and Health in New Entrant Children Study (referred to as the Children's Learning Study), which is investigating health and learning in five year old children as they start school in Christchurch, New Zealand. Parents of new entrant children from nine participating schools are contacted about the study and give their informed consent for themselves and their child to participate. Children's reading, writing, and maths skills are assessed as they enter school and then again a year later when the child turns six years old. Parent interviews are also conducted as a part of the Children's Learning Study at the ages of five and six to gather general information about children's family situations, health, social interactions and behaviour.

Ethical Procedures

Before either the pilot or main study could be conducted, ethical considerations and procedures needed to be made and followed and ethical approval sought.

Ethical Approval

An application to The University of Canterbury Human Ethics Committee was made in order to gain ethical approval. This approval was granted (see Appendix 4). Second, due to this study using participants from the larger Children's Learning Study, ethical approval was needed from the Upper South Health Resource Council, which has given ethical approval to this larger study under their guidelines. In order to obtain this approval, it was necessary for this research study to be explained with particular reference to how participants would be selected and what information from the Children's Learning Study would be used. This approval was also granted (see Appendix 5)

Informed Consent

School

It was necessary to gain permission from the appropriate school to conduct interviews as interviews took place within a school setting. The deputy principal of the selected school was contacted, met in person, and given an information sheet about the study (see Appendix 6). At this time he did not have any questions about the study or any reservations and therefore gave permission for the study to be conducted within the school. Individual meetings with the two teachers of the children to be in the study were held, and the same information sheet was given to them about the study. They then had an opportunity to ask questions, and ultimately gave permission for the study to be conducted within or nearby their classrooms during school time.

Parents

It was necessary to gain informed, voluntary and written consent from parents due to the young age of participants in this study. Parents were given an information sheet (see Appendix 7) about the research when contacted about participating in the study and then signed a consent form giving their child permission to participate in the research (see Appendix 8). Parents also agreed to discuss the study with their child and gave permission for the teacher to be asked about their child's language.

Children

Children themselves were given the active right to participate in the study or not. Children were told at the beginning of interviews that they did not have to answer any questions if they did not want to and that they could rejoin their class at anytime. Children were also informed before interviews began that their answers would be recorded and that

they could read what was written down on the forms or have it read to them at any time, if they wished (see Appendix 3).

The Main Study

Participants

Participants were 17 children participating in the Children's Learning Study from two classes at one of the nine schools recruited for this larger study. The children were aged between five and six years of age (see Table 2 for list of all children and their ages). Children all started school prior to this study commencing..

The parents remaining on a list after the pilot study were contacted in order by telephone and informed about the main study. Most parents were then met in person when they dropped their child off at school and given the information sheet and consent form to sign. For some parents however, this was not possible, in these cases it was arranged for an information sheet and consent form to be sent home with children in their reading bags. The signed consent form was then returned the next day and given to the class teacher for collection on the day of interviews. Parents were told when first contacted on the telephone which day their child would be interviewed, so they could inform and prepare their child for my arrival.

Teacher Questionnaire of Children's Language Ability

The two teachers were asked to fill out a questionnaire designed to assess the children's general language ability (see Appendix 9). The teacher questionnaires were developed from a subset of questions from the speech and language skills section of *The Schedule of Growing Skills II* and consisted of three items. The questions chosen from *The Schedule of Growing Skills II* for the questionnaire were: "can the child produce a

sentence of five or more words?”, “Can this child describe a sequence of events?” and “can this child give an explanation of these events?” These questions were chosen so information could be obtained about each child’s current language skills, so that the responses children might give to questions could be better understood. The questionnaire had two components; first, teachers were asked to circle yes or no to whether the child could do each skill listed in the questionnaire, and second, there was space below these items for teachers to write comments about these skills. Both teachers circled the yes response for all items for every child and made comments as to the overall language ability of 15 children (see Table 2 for list of teacher comments made for each child).

Procedure

After the school and appropriate teachers had granted permission for this study to commence, the names of the children to be part of the pilot study were given to teachers and a dialogue with the teacher took place as to the time, day and place they thought would be the best to conduct the study. At this time teachers were given the teacher questionnaires to fill out which were returned prior to the commencement of interviews. Teachers and parents were asked to explain to the children that they were going to be a part of this study and that someone would be coming to school and asking them some questions, so the children were prepared and therefore unsurprised by my arrival.

Recording Procedure

All answers were recorded in the form of handwritten field notes on specially designed forms (see Appendix 10). There was one form for each child. Everything that the child said, as well as any prompts used to encourage a child to elaborate or answer questions was noted as much as possible. Additional comments or notes were recorded at

the bottom of forms during and after interviews. Field notes were chosen in favour of the more time consuming and expensive methods of audio or videotaping interviews. This was to eliminate any potential anxiety and discomfort that these methods might elicit in children, as well as to reduce the need to transcribe interviews so that the overall content and most relevant of children's answers could be analysed.

Setting

Interviews took place over three weeks on five separate days in the final weeks of the school year. Interviews were conducted in a multi-purpose room situated up three steps between two classrooms. There were no walls in this space so the two classrooms were clearly visible. This setting ensured that the children could see and hear their teacher and class during interviews. Interviews took approximately 15 minutes per child. Most interviews were conducted side-by-side at a child size table and chairs; however, on one of the days two of the children were interviewed on the floor, in this instance the child and I also sat side-by-side. On this day the table used for the other interviews was in use by a reading group. Because the space was shared there was some noise and movement, however, the children seemed used to this and were not distracted. For the other interviews there were no major distractions as interviews were conducted during reading time, so both classes were generally quiet.

Interview Procedure

Introduction

Each child was called into the shared space between the two new entrant classrooms, one-by-one for their individual interview. The child was firstly asked which seat they would like to sit on at the child-sized table, and then asked if they were comfortable before I

introduced myself, and explained to them why I was there. It was explained to children at this time that they did not have to answer any questions if they did not want to, and that they could go back to class at any time (see Appendix 3).

Strategies

First, the story “Roy the Responsible Rabbit” was read to each child. Next, the child was asked the retell question “tell me what happened in the story”. Then children were asked four structured open-ended questions and prompts if necessary. These were followed up by some further questions which varied for each child depending on the answers they gave (see Appendix 3)

The second task was the Puppet Scenario. The child was introduced to the two puppets Quackers and Bunnykins, and asked if they could remember their names. The scenario was then acted out in front of the child with questions intermittently asked during it (see Appendix 3 for script). The first question asked “what just happened?” after each child was shown either Quackers or Bunnykins stealing the pencil. This is a comprehension question asked to ensure children have understood the main element of the scenario and therefore ensures they will be able to understand the ensuing questions. The puppet who “steals” the pencil was counterbalanced so that one child saw Bunnykins steal the pencil and the next Quackers and so on. The puppet that stole the pencil was counterbalanced to reduce any potential bias associated with children identifying more with one of the puppets. After being shown the scenario and asked all the set questions the child was asked a series of individualised follow-up questions.

The third strategy was the First Day of School Photo where the child was shown the photo of either the boy or girl. That is, the child was shown the photo of the child that was the same gender as themselves, and told that the child in the photo had just turned five and

was about to start their first day of school. The child was then asked a series of three questions (see Appendix 3) about what they thought the child in the photo needed to know about starting school and what they might be feeling. These structured questions were then followed by further open-ended follow-up questions.

In the final strategy, the child participated in the Semi-Structured Interview, without any props or aids. The child was asked a direct question about what he/she thought was the “best thing” about them (see Appendix 3).

Chapter 5

Results and Discussion

Appropriateness of the Revised Strategies

This chapter will examine the appropriateness of the revised strategies and methodology used in this study. Children's responses to each question within each strategy will be presented and then its appropriateness considered. Responses were deemed suitable if children first understood the question and second if they were able to respond in a logical way, that is, if they responded according to the questions intended purpose. Following the presentation of results for each strategy a discussion of the suitability of each strategy will be made. An overall evaluation of the appropriateness of the revised strategies will conclude the chapter.

Strategy One - Roy the Rabbit Story

Children seemingly enjoyed the story "Roy the responsible rabbit", they were found to be attentive and some children made comments about the story or the pictures as they were read to. A couple of children tried to read along to the story. As the story was of a reasonable difficulty; they were unable to do so successfully, often reading the words slightly late. These children were told that they did not need to read the story as it was quite "tricky" and that they should just listen.

Retelling of the Roy the Rabbit Story

Story retelling was used to determine if children were able to comprehend the Roy the Rabbit Story. Retelling stories is a strategy used to help children comprehend content and concepts of books, as well as to aid the development of oral language .

Six children were able to give accurate accounts of the story and its characters indicating good comprehension:

- Charlie: "His mother telled him to grow some carrots, they started off as little seeds and they had to wait until the orange tops and that night they had all the carrots to eat."
- Fergus: "Once he said he didn't want to do it anymore but his father said you keep watching them and they will grow and they did."
- Jake: "Roy found a seed when he was going to school and then he wanted to grow them and they did and they had fresh carrots for tea."
- Joshua: "Roy wanted to go and pick the carrots but they weren't ready, but he saw green but he didn't know but he found it out. Then the orange tops came and he could pick them."
- Winston: "Everyday after school he watered and he watered and he looked and looked but it didn't work but his mum told him to keep watering so he did and then one day the carrots growed and he ate them."
- Wylie: "Roy was being really good and decided he would be responsible but it was really hard but he did it because he was good."

Seven children retold the basic events of the story, indicating comprehension of the main events:

- Emily: "He planted some seeds and at the end he ate them."
- Gemma: "He found some carrot seeds. He needed to wait until he could see orange tops."
- Ingrid: "He kept growing and growing the carrots until they got fresh and he could eat them."
- Jimmy: "He went down the road and he found some carrot seeds."

Pippa: “Roy found some carrot seeds on the road when he was walking with his family.”

Sarah: “Roy got some beans and they grew to become real carrots and he ate them for dinner.”

Timothy: “He planted some carrots and he kept on watering them.”

Four children retold one event from the story indicating poor comprehension:

Imogen: “Roy wanted to plant the carrot seeds.”

Jane: “Roy wanted to get some carrots.”

Phoebe: “Roy picked the carrots.”

Megan: “Roy planted some seeds.”

The story may have had language that was too difficult or the story may have been too complex for these four children, alternatively the story may not have interested these children and therefore they did not listen closely to the story and could not recall its events.

There may have been more appropriate ways of assessing the children’s comprehension of the Roy the Rabbit Story that would have enabled more of the children to express detailed understanding of the main events of the story. Children could be informed prior to the commencement of the story that they should listen carefully and try to remember what happens; alternatively asking children a series of yes or no questions about the events of the story might be a more appropriate way of assessing young children’s comprehension than the retell strategy. For example, asking the children questions such as “did Roy find some carrot seeds on the road?” and encouraging children to reply either “yes” or “no”, may give a more accurate indication as to children’s understanding of the story. Changes to the story itself might also need to be made by simplifying the language used, or a new story may need to be sourced.

“What was Roy thinking in his head when his carrots weren’t ready to pick?”

This was an inference question designed to shift children’s focus away from the events of the story and to help them discuss Roy’s internal attributes and thoughts. A thought bubble was used to help children understand that this question was about what Roy might have been *thinking* when his carrots did not seem to be growing. Twelve children (70%) were appropriately able to infer Roy’s thinking:

Fergus: “Maybe it wouldn’t work.”

Imogen: “They will never grow.”

Sarah: “He was thinking they wouldn’t grow.”

Timothy: “They will never grow.”

Wylie: “Thought they would never grow.”

Charlie: “Oh the carrots aren’t growing, when are they going to grow? When are the green leaves going to show?”

Joshua: “He so much wanted them to grow; he was saying in his mind he just wants them to grow.”

Megan: “That it will take forever.”

Phoebe: “When will they come out?”

Winston: “He wished he could pick them.”

Jake: “The carrots might grow soon.”

Emily: “That the seeds weren’t seeds.”

This inference question enabled most of the children to answer appropriately (70%). This included three children (Imogen, Megan, Phoebe) whose comprehension of the story as indicated by retelling appeared to be poor. The fact that these three children were able to make an accurate inference about Roy’s thinking immediately following a poor retelling indicates the comprehension question may be the problem.

Four children gave inaccurate thoughts in response to this question:

Gemma: “To pick the carrots to see if they were ready.”

Jane: “He had to get them after school.”

Ingrid: “Thinking that they were big and fresh.”

Pippa: “He was thinking that they could be yummy.”

One child gave a tautological response to this question by restating the question in his response:

Jimmy: “That they weren’t ready.”

The thought bubble used in this question did not seem to aid these five children to answer this question accurately. Children did not know what it was or what it indicated and therefore it did not fulfil its purpose, which was to aid children to talk about Roy’s thoughts. Thought bubbles are predominantly used in comic books and cartoons to reveal what a character is thinking. Children of this age and/or generation may not have been exposed to media that employs such methods and therefore children were unfamiliar with what a thought bubble was, making its use in this study irrelevant. Wellman, Hollander and Schult studied three and four-year-olds understanding of thought bubbles and found that very few of the children knew what a thought bubble was, however, after being instructed that it “shows what someone is thinking” the majority of the children were able to understand that the thought bubble depicted thinking. It may be that the thought bubble is a useful tool for depicting thinking but needs to be explained to children prior to its use.

This inference question enabled most children to accurately infer thinking, but it did not contribute to the investigation of character strengths and therefore is not useful. This question could be eliminated from this strategy.

“What did Roy do?” (When his carrots were not ready to pick)

The intent of this question was to elicit children to respond according to the character strengths Roy displayed in the book. In the story Roy did not give up even though his carrots did not seem to be growing, that is, he displayed perseverance. The question elicited six children to respond as planned:

Fergus: “Kept waiting and watering them.”

Imogen: “He kept looking after them.”

Ingrid: “He waited and waited after school.”

Phoebe: “Waited and waited.”

Sarah: “He picked them when they were ready and then he’ll be able to eat them and he’s happy.”

Wylie: “He tried until he did it.”

This question assisted six of the children (35%) to respond in a way that indicated some form of character strength in Roy.

The question elicited seven children to respond according to the actual words of the story to explain what Roy did:

Emily: “He planted and watered and looked and watered.”

Gemma: “He watered the plants.”

Joshua: “He watered them and watched them.”

Megan: “He watched and watered them.”

Pippa: “He watered and planted them.”

Jane: “He had to keep on watching.”

Timothy: “He kept on watering them everyday and they never came up.”

These children used the words from the book to explain what Roy did, and therefore it is unclear as to whether these children recognised perseverance in Roy or not.

The question was problematic for four of the children who could either not give an answer, or did so inaccurately:

Charlie: "I'm not too sure about that one."

Jake: "He wrote carrots."

Jimmy: "He wanted to eat them."

Winston: "Pick the carrots."

This question may need revising in order to make it less comprehension based or more specifically related to a particular event. The children had to remember the events from the story and answer accordingly which for the majority of children (11/17) was too difficult. Changing the question to "What did Roy do when his carrots weren't ready to pick?" may make the question more explicit and therefore easier for children to answer. In addition, children could be asked to respond in their own words to avoid them merely repeating the words from the story.

"What do you think Roy really wanted to do?" (Instead of waiting for his carrots to grow)

This question was designed to assess whether or not the children could infer that Roy's actions in the story may have been different to his desires. That is, that Roy demonstrated self-regulation by looking after the carrots instead of doing another more pleasurable activity. Thirteen children (76%) were able to infer Roy's desires. For example:

Emily: "Pick them."

Gemma: "Eat the carrots."

Jimmy: "Have a carrot supper."

This question was effective in facilitating thirteen children to respond according to Roy's preferred actions.

The question was problematical for four children who did not infer logical thoughts or could not answer the question:

Imogen: “He wanted to plant the seeds.”

Jake: “He watered them and wanted them to grow into carrots.”

Charlie: “I don’t know.”

Winston: *No response to this question, even when prompted.*

These children may have not yet developed the inference skills necessary to respond to such a question, or Imogen and Jake may have misunderstood the question itself.

An additional follow-up question asking children why it was that Roy did not do this preferred action may have yielded answers that revealed their understandings more precisely, and given more of an indication of whether the children understood that by not doing his preferred action Roy was displaying self-regulation.

“What was Roy thinking when he saw the orange tops of his carrots?”

This was a question designed to assess whether children could infer the satisfaction that often comes about after succeeding at something. The question enabled five children to answer in this way:

Imogen: “He was excited.”

Jimmy: “That they were ready and he was feeling happy”

Timothy: “He was really happy because he could play with his friends now.”

Joshua: “Yay! They’re ready.”

Wylie: “He thought that every time he planted one they would really grow.”

These five children (30%) were able to answer the question in the way it was intended and infer a sense of satisfaction in Roy that the carrots were now ready to pick.

This question resulted in twelve children inferring the general thoughts of Roy now that his carrots were ready. For example:

Fergus: “He could pick them now.”

Jake: “To have them for tea.”

Megan: “He could pick them, they were ready.”

Phoebe: “It’s time to pick them.”

All seventeen children in the study were able to infer logical thoughts of Roy when he saw the orange tops of the carrots; however, the majority of children (70%) did so in a way that reflected what Roy would be thinking of doing now that the carrots were ready, rather than in a way that reflected a sense of satisfaction. The children’s responses may reflect that the question is flawed. It might be that at the age of five-and-a-half to six years children do not associate a sense of achievement/satisfaction after finishing a chore; instead, they recognise a sense of relief. The question therefore, may be asking for them to explain something they do not yet understand. A reworded question could ask children what Roy was *feeling* when he saw the orange tops of the carrots instead of what he was *thinking*. By asking the children to infer Roy’s feelings as opposed to his thoughts more children may have been able to respond.

“What is the best thing about Roy?”

The purpose of this question was to directly identify some of Roy’s character strengths. In order to answer this question children needed to 1) understand the story 2) recognise that Roy’s actions in the story were “good” and 3) prioritise one of these as the

“best thing”. Thirteen of the seventeen children were asked this question. Of those children asked it, seven identified at least one positive internal quality of Roy:

- Emily: “He liked it when his carrots were ready to pick, he jumped when they were ready.”
- Fergus: “He knows how to plant and keeps watering the plants because then they would grow.”
- Imogen: “He kept growing the seeds until they grew.”
- Ingrid: “He liked picking the carrots and eating them.”
- Joshua: “He’s a happy rabbit.”
- Megan: “That he listened to his mum.”
- Pippa: “Because he didn’t pick them he waited until his mum said he could.”

These children were able to identify at least one internal characteristic that they recognised Roy displayed in the story. In contrast, five children named external or physical characteristics of Roy:

- Charlie: “He’s a pink rabbit.”
- Jake: “He found the seeds and they grew and he had carrots for tea.”
- Jimmy: “That he found some carrots and he could eat them.”
- Jane: “He got the carrots. He’s a rabbit.”
- Phoebe: “He had a bulge in his neck.”

These six children were able to identify a “best thing” about Roy; however, these were either Roy’s physical attributes, or Roy’s actions in the story.

One child responded according to his own general knowledge about rabbits instead of using content from the story to base his answer on:

Winston: “He can hide and he can jump really high.”

This question was particularly effective. It also provided information that some of the children were not yet able to identify, or chose not to identify the internal attributes the book was portraying. This question was useful, and if modified, for example by asking children, “What is the best thing about Roy on the inside?” more children may be able to identify Roy’s internal attributes.

“What could Roy have done differently?”

Ten children were asked this question which was designed to assess whether children could think of alternative positive actions Roy could have taken and therefore enable further character strengths to be identified. Children responded in the following ways for example:

Fergus: “Waited until the orange bits came and kept watering or just kept watching.”

Jimmy: “Eaten one when it just came out but he needed to wash it first.”

Joshua: “Brought some from the store.”

This question was ineffective for all children. Children were able to think of alternative actions Roy could have taken. However, answers did not reveal further character strengths and did not add anything to this study as a whole and would not be used again.

Discussion of the Appropriateness of the Roy the Rabbit Story

The story itself as well as some of the questions asked to children, were not entirely successful at eliciting children to discuss character strengths. In saying this, it was useful in other ways. Reading is a main focus of children at this age, and books are familiar. By

reading a story first, children were eased into interviews and asked to do a common task. Furthermore, the story introduces children to character strengths and cues them to talk about positive attributes; this may have been helpful for other questions that followed.

Given that a story is a helpful tool for starting interviews, sourcing a more appropriate story for engaging children in discussions about character strengths may help improve responses children give. Children do not just use text to decipher meaning of a book; they also use pictures. Finding a new picture book that also has illustrations that help to convey the story more effectively than the pictures from the Roy the Rabbit Story may also help contribute to children's comprehension of the story. Furthermore, the Roy the Rabbit Story was homemade, in the sense that it was downloaded from the internet, colour printed and then bound. Utilising an alternative picture book that pre-exists may increase the stories appeal to children and in turn better children's responses.

Strategy Two - Puppet Scenario

The scenario shown to children was well received. Children loved the puppets and almost all children wanted to touch them. Children tended to laugh during parts of the scenario, and their attention was maintained for the entire time.

Recall of the Puppet Names

To ensure the names given to the puppets were appropriate and to determine if children could distinguish between the two, they were asked to give each puppet's name shortly after being introduced to them. Fifteen of the children (88%) were able to remember and say the names of the puppets. Two children gave slightly modified names. Wylie called Quackers "Crackers" and Timothy called the puppets "Quacks" and

“Bunnykicks”. It may be that these children did not hear the names properly, could not accurately remember them, or were unable to say the real names. In future, simplifying the names might result in all children being able to remember and say the names accurately.

Description of the “Theft”

To ensure children had understood the central theme of the scenario (that the puppet had stolen the pencil) and would therefore be able to answer the questions that would be based around this, children were asked, “What just happened?” after being shown either Bunnykins or Quackers stealing the other’s pencil. For the purposes of simplification, the puppet that stole the pencil will be referred to as “Thief” and the puppet that had the pencil stolen will be called “Victim”. Nine children (53%) who said that the “Thief” either stole or took the pencil (taking the pencil without asking was considered to be an understanding that the pencil was stolen) understood the scenario:

Charlie: “[Thief] wants to draw but doesn’t have a pencil but then he went into [Victim’s] case and stole one.”

Fergus: “He [Thief] stole the other ones pencil.”

Gemma: “[Thief] took the pencil without asking.”

Imogen: “He [Thief] took the special pencil.”

Megan: “He took [Victim’s] pencil.”

Phoebe: “It was [Victim’s] favourite pencil and [Thief] took it.”

Pippa: “He [Thief] took that pencil away from him.”

Timothy: “He [Thief] didn’t have a pencil so he took [Victim’s] pencil.”

Wylie: “He didn’t ask [Victim]

These nine children's responses indicated that they understood that the "Thief" had stolen the "Victim's" pencil.

Responses indicated eight children (47%) had not understood that the pencil was stolen. Of these children, two explained what happened:

Emily: "He [Thief] picked up [Victim's] favourite [pencil]."

Winston: "He [Thief] got [Victim's] favourite pencil."

Three children indicated the "Thief's" motive behind taking the pencil

Ingrid "He [Thief] forgot his pencil and didn't know where it was."

Jake: "He [Thief] might want to have that pencil. He [Victim] might let him have it and pick a different pencil. [Victim] shared the pencil."

Jane: "He [Thief] wanted to do some writing and didn't have a pencil."

"So what did he do?"

"He [Thief] went and got one."

Two children's responses indicated that they did not understand what had happened:

Jimmy "He [Thief] could draw it if he put pencil on the paper."

Sarah: "He [Thief] could get a pencil and do some writing."

Finally, one child's response is unclear as to whether they understood the pencil was stolen:

Joshua: "[Thief] takes his [Victim's] pencil away because that's his [Thief's] favourite one."

The scenario was not clear enough for these children to grasp the main event of the scenario. All children recognised that the "Thief" now had the pencil, but some children did not consider that the puppet had stolen it. It is unclear whether these children did not understand that the pencil had been stolen, or whether they just did not say this in their

answer. Further probing may have helped to determine this. There are several possible explanations as to why eight of the children did not consider the pencil to be stolen; first, new entrant classes tend to be cooperative and materials such as scissors, glue and paper are handed out by teachers not owned by children, so the children therefore may not have considered it “wrong” for the “Thief” to take the pencil. Alternatively, the children may not have placed enough importance and monetary value on the pencil to consider it to be stolen. In future, it may be necessary to make it even clearer that the puppet had stolen the pencil or to tell children that the pencil had been stolen to ensure the ensuing questions will be answered in accordance with this. Alternatively utilising an item with a higher value such as a cell phone may result in different responses

“What is [the Thief] thinking in his head?”

This was an inference question designed to assess what children can infer about how a person might think/feel after they have done something they should not have done. To aid children to understand that this question was asking about the internal thoughts/feelings of the puppet a thought bubble was again utilised by placing it next to the “Thief”. The question elicited 15 children (88%) to infer logical thoughts. Of these children six (35%) were able to put themselves directly in the “Thief’s” shoes.

Charlie: “[Victim] might growl at me cos I stole his pencil.”

Gemma: “To write with it and not tell him [Victim].”

Ingrid: “How to write properly.”

Joshua: “I can write.”

Pippa: “To draw with it.”

Winston: “I want to do some writing.”

These six children responded in ways that revealed they were putting themselves directly in the “Thief’s” head and inferring his thoughts.

Nine children (56%) accurately inferred the thoughts of the “Thief” but did so in a more indirect manner

Emily: “That he’s [Thief’s] ready to write.”

Fergus: “He’s [Thief’s] wanting to write.”

Jake: “He [Thief] might want to have it.”

Jimmy: “He [Thief] didn’t steal it.”

Megan: “That [Thief’s] allowed to use it and [Victim] won’t mind.”

Phoebe: “He [Thief] wants to write with it.”

Sarah: “What he [Thief] could draw.”

Timothy: “That he [Thief] might steal it.”

Wylie: “That he [Thief] can just help himself.”

The fifteen children, who accurately inferred thoughts, revealed they were able to put themselves in another’s shoes.

The question was problematic for two children who were unable to answer:

Imogen: “Don’t know.”

Jane: *No answer*

The three different levels with which children responded to this question may reveal differences in cognitive development. This question did not encourage children to respond according to “morals” and therefore character strengths could not be inferred from the children’s responses. The thought bubble was again not understood by children and was therefore not a helpful aid for getting children to think about the puppet’s internal thoughts/feelings.

What should [the Thief] do? ”

This question was aimed at identifying whether the children could inductively reason to identify the morally-correct action for the “Thief” to take and therefore, reveal an understanding of character strengths. Twelve children (70%) identified a “morally-correct” action for the “Thief” to take:

- Charlie: “Give the pencil back; put it back into the pencil case.”
- Emily: “Give it to [Victim].”
- Fergus: “Put it back and ask, ‘can I do it after you?’”
- Gemma: “Go and tell [Victim] that he has his pen.”
- Jake: “Put the pencil back in there.”
(Points to pencil case)
- Jimmy: “Give back the pencil.”
- Jane: “Should give [Victim] the pencil back.”
- Joshua: “Give it to [Victim], if he [Thief] doesn’t want to be very scared.”
- Megan: “Go to [Victim] and say sorry for taking it, and give it back.”
- Pippa: “Give it back to him [Victim].”
- Sarah: “Give it to him [Victim].”
- Winston: “He [Thief] took his [Victim’s] favourite pencil. He should give it back.”

The question was effective for 13 of the children (76%) who answered that the morally-correct thing for the “Thief” to do was to give the pencil back to the “Victim”. It could be interpreted that these children are revealing character strengths such as honesty and justice/fairness; however, it is uncertain as to whether these children are revealing strength of character or an understanding of socially acceptable behaviour.

Two children (12%) identified a “morally-incorrect” action for the “Thief” to take:

Timothy: “[Thief] doesn’t have a pencil he should write first then give it back.”

Ingrid: “Hide it so that she doesn’t know where it is, and that [Thief] used it.”

These two children responded in a “morally-incorrect” manner by stating that the “Thief” should hide the pencil or write with it first before giving it back perhaps revealing a lack of understanding of societal norms/values, or what they themselves would have done to avoid punishment.

One child gave an irrelevant answer:

Wylie: “He is writing with [Victim’s] favourite pencil, cheeky bunny.”

Wylie was identified as responding irrelevantly as his response did not answer the question. His response did however; make a judgement of the “Thief” by saying that he was “cheeky”.

One child gave an unintelligible response:

Phoebe: “Going to write now, tell [Victim] if he can use it.”

Phoebe’s response has been classified as unintelligible as it is unclear what is meant. It may be that Phoebe used the incorrect word of “tell” instead of “ask” by mistake.

Finally, the question was problematic for one child:

Imogen: *No answer*

This question was intended to encourage children to talk about moral character strengths and may be appropriate for studying young children’s character strengths. The nature of this question however, does result in socially desirable responses from children. The “moral” character strengths such as fairness, justice and honesty tend to be socially valued; therefore, children’s responses are likely to reflect social norms and values. A

follow-up question asking what the child would do may help to determine whether children themselves would act this way or whether they are repeating what they think the “right” thing to do is.

What does [the Thief] want to do?

This question aimed to reduce socially desirable responding by allowing children to acknowledge the “Thief’s” motives and desires. In addition, this question was intended to determine whether the children understood the difference between the “Thief’s” actions and desires. Fifteen children (88%) logically inferred the “Thief’s” motives:

Charlie: “Draw.”

Emily: “Writing.”

Fergus: “Write.”

Gemma: “Write with it.”

Ingrid: “Hide it, he can write where it is hid.”

Jake: “He wants to draw.”

Jimmy: “Draw.”

Jane: “He wants to write with it.”

Joshua: “Write with the pencil.”

Megan: “Just wants to steal it and write.”

Phoebe: “Write.”

Pippa: “He wants to draw with it – that pencils not even his.”

Sarah: “He wants to keep it.”

Timothy: “He wants to write first.”

Winston: “Write.”

These children answered the question according to its intended purpose by saying that what the “Thief” really wanted to do was to write or keep the pencil.

Two children responded to the question inappropriately:

Wylie: “He could have asked, asked [Victim] if he’s allowed to use it. He was being quite cheeky.”

Imogen: “Ask everyone where his pencil is.”

These two children were unable to answer the previous question and appear to be answering it here instead. It may be that these children needed more time to process the previous question.

This question seemed to be appropriate; however, it did not directly ask children about character strengths and therefore did not result in children responding in ways that indicate strength of character.

What is [the Thief] thinking now [after returning the pencil]?

This question was asked to determine whether the children have an understanding of how one might feel after doing the “morally-correct/socially desirable” thing. Two children responded in this reflective manner:

Wylie: “He was a bit naughty for stealing it.”

Gemma: “Next time he takes things he should ask.”

These responses reflect on the “Thief’s” behaviour in the third person. Wylie’s response appears to be an evaluation of his preceding responses about the “cheeky Thief”.

Twelve children (70%) answered the question in a way that reflected the “Thief” would be thinking about the pencil/writing:

Charlie: “Now I can’t draw.”

Emily: “That he needs a pencil.”

Fergus: "He wants to write."

Ingrid: "Where is the pencil?"

Jake: "He still wants to draw but he needs to get a new pencil from here."
(*Points to pencil case*)

Jimmy: "That his pencil has gone."

Jane: "He wants to get a different pencil."

Joshua: "Where will I find a pencil?"

Megan: "To get another pencil."

Pippa: "That he could find another one."

Sarah: "Where he could find another pencil."

Winston: "Want to get it back."

These children responded that the "Thief" would still be thinking about the pencil/wanting to write, as his desires have not been fulfilled. Charlie and Joshua were again able to put themselves in the place of the "Thief" and answer the question in the first person.

This question was problematic for three children:

Timothy: "He is thinking he should give it back once he's finished."

Phoebe: "He gave it back."

Imogen: *No answer*

Timothy's response to this question reflects that he perhaps did not understand the question or had not realised that the "Thief" had given the "Victim" the pencil back. Phoebe gave a tautological response, and Imogen was not able to answer the question or chose not to.

This question was not useful for eliciting children to talk about character strengths and could be omitted from this strategy.

“Why did [the Thief] give the pencil back?”

This set question was intended to probe the children’s understanding of the reasons for choosing a morally-correct action. The children responded to this question in three ways. Three children (18%) responded according to a fear of reprisal from the “Victim”:

Charlie: “Because [Victim] might growl.”

Gemma: “Because the [Victim] was looking for it.”

Joshua: “Because he [Thief] didn’t want to be very scared.”

These children’s responses reflect that the “Thief” gave the pencil back to avoid negative consequences.

Eight children (47%) gave responses that indicated the “Thief” gave the pencil back due to an understanding of societal norms. That is, the normative moral code that giving back what you took is the “right” thing to do:

Fergus: “Because it wasn’t his [Thief’s].”

Jimmy: “Because it’s nice to do that.”

Jane: “Because it was [Victim’s].”

Megan: “Because he [Thief] wants to be nice.”

Pippa: “Because it wasn’t his [Thief’s].”

Sarah: “Because it’s his.”
(*Points to Victim*)

Timothy: “It’s not his [Thief’s] pencil.”

Wylie: “Because it was [Victim’s] own pencil
and [Thief] was naughty to take it because
he wanted to do writings, so was cheeky
and just took it.”

These children’s responses all indicate an understanding of why the “Thief” gave the pencil back. That is, their responses reveal an understanding of societal norms and values.

Five children (29%) acknowledged the “Victim’s” loss:

- Emily: “Because he [Thief] knew it was his [Victim’s] special one.”
- Imogen: “Because it was his [Victim’s] special pencil and he didn’t want anyone to touch it.”
- Jake: “Because that was his [Victim’s] favourite pencil.”
- Winston: “Because it was his [Victim’s] favourite pencil.”

These children responded in a way that reflects empathy for the “Victim”, in that, they were able to put themselves in the “Victim’s” shoes and understand how he might feel to have had his pencil stolen, and that the “Thief” gave the pencil back on this basis.

One child gave a morally-incorrect response by blaming the “Victim” for not taking more care with the pencil:

- Ingrid: “Because it wasn’t hiding in a good place.”

Phoebe’s response indicates the question may have been confusing for her:

- Phoebe: “Because he was already writing with it.”

This question revealed three clear ways of understanding the reason behind the “Thief’s” actions. Character strengths may be able to be implied from some of the children’s responses. The children, who thought it was “nice” to give back the pencil, may have been referring to kindness. The ability to recognise the “Victim’s” loss may also indicate a strength of character. It is unclear if these responses are true reflections of children’s understandings of character strengths or whether they reflect the children’s ability to apply social norms regarding taking things that do not belong to you.

“What else could [the Thief] have done [instead of taking the pencil]?”

This question was designed to see if the children could recognise what the “Thief” should have done instead of stealing the pencil in the first place, that is, if they could identify a morally-correct action. Six children appropriately thought that the “Thief” could have asked to use the pencil:

- Fergus: “Asked.”
- Gemma: “Asked him [Victim].”
- Imogen: “Asked him [Victim].”
- Megan: “Asked for it.”
- Phoebe: “Say [Victim] can I please use it.”
- Pippa: “Tell him that he took it before he took it.”

These children all reveal a fundamental understanding that if you want to use something that does not belong to you the “right” thing to do is to ask first.

Six children responded that the “Thief” could have found an alternative pencil:

- Charlie: “Leaved it there and gone and got his own pencil.”
- Emily: “Chosen another pencil.”
- Jane: “Got a different one.”
- Joshua: “Got a different one.”
- Timothy: “He could have got another pencil.”
- Winston: “Put it back in the hole [pencil case].”

These children recognised a plausible alternative that the “Thief” could have taken instead of stealing the pencil.

Jimmy thought that the “Thief” could have apologised to the “Victim”:

- Jimmy: “He could have said I’m sorry.”

Jake responded by saying:

Jake: “He [Victim] could’ve just given it to him.”

This response indicates that the “Victim” should have been able to read the “Thief’s” mind and given the “Thief” the pencil.

Finally, Ingrid responded that the “Thief” could have selected a better hiding place:

Ingrid: “Hidden it in a better place like inside his hair”

Overall, this question achieved its intended purpose, as fourteen children (87%) were able to describe socially and morally acceptable alternatives to stealing or a further positive action that the “Thief” could have taken after stealing the pencil. Whether this question helped uncover children’s conceptions of character strengths is unclear. The positive alternatives that the children identified, such as, not taking the pencil or finding another one, could indicate understandings of strength of character. However, whether the children understand this as a choice, are applying social norms or acting to avoid punishment cannot be inferred.

“Why would that [alternative action] have been better?”

This second follow-up question asks children in a different way about the reasons behind doing the morally correct thing they identified in response to the previous question. The ten children asked this question responded in the intended way:

Emily: “Because it was very nice.”

Fergus: “Then they [Victim] would know that they’d [Thief] done it. Ask, then they [Victim] might say yes. They [Victim] think they might have lost it so you can’t steal it you have to ask.”

Imogen: “Because someone would want to find it and he [Victim] couldn’t find it he [Victim] would think he’d lost it.”

Jake: "That he [Thief] was being nice."

Jane: "Then he [Victim] wouldn't be grumpy."

Joshua: "Because he's [Thief's] very nice."

Megan: "It's being nice."

Phoebe: "When you take things without asking its stealing."

Pippa: "Because then he [Victim] would know."

Winston: "So he [Victim] didn't have to look everywhere."

The children were able to give an explanation as to why their alternative action would have been better than stealing the pencil. This again reveals an understanding of social norms, however, fails to identify children's conceptions of character strengths.

Discussion of the Appropriateness of the Puppet Scenario

It was the aim of the Puppet Scenario to reveal what young children might understand about moral character strengths; however, the content and the questions asked about the Puppet Scenario did not appropriately assess this. If this method for assessing children's self-perceptions were to be used again several changes would need to be made. First, the scenario would need to be simplified, as it was questionable as to whether all of the children in this study understood the main event that the pencil was stolen. Second, the questions asked during the scenario would need to be further refined in order to directly assess character strengths, as the questions asked in this study did not result in clear enough answers for character strengths to be confidently identified. The Puppet Scenario was also somewhat awkward to perform, in that acting out the scenario with the puppets, asking questions and writing down children's answers was difficult, resulting in long pauses at certain points in the scenario. In order to avoid this in future research the scenario either

needs to be acted out first, and then questions asked, or another person may be required to do either the recording of responses or the acting of the puppets. Alternatively, the scenario could be changed from using puppets to actors to perform the scenario. Actors could be filmed performing a similar sort of scenario which could then be recorded onto a Digital Versatile Disc (DVD) and played to children. The DVD could then easily be paused at certain points and questions asked to children. Similarly short vignettes of pre-existing television programmes or movies that provide good examples of positive character could be utilised. This method of presenting a scenario would be developmentally appropriate and engaging for the children. Given the technology of today it would also be practical in the setting in which these interviews take place as portable DVD players or laptop computers could be used to play such recordings.

Strategy Three - First Day of School Photo

The two photos used, were seemingly appropriate. No child said that the children were not starting school soon, or were too young or old for example. In fact, children did the opposite. After being introduced to the photo, several of the children said they thought they knew the child, Gemma went so far as to say the girl went to her kindergarten. The photos therefore have been deemed appropriate, and the children they show to be realistic.

“What would you tell this boy/girl about starting school?”

This was a question intended to introduce children to the photo and to help them connect their ideas about character strengths needed in a new and strange situation, and to encourage them to respond to this and the ensuing questions based on their own recent experiences. This was a good question as the children’s responses did reflect their own

experiences and knowledge of behavioural/moral codes which most likely reflect experiences from their first days of school.

Six children responded according to rules/correct behaviours and general information about school:

Fergus: "Be good or you won't get presents"

Imogen: "That when there's three bells you just get a drink or go to toilet."

"What else would you tell her?"
"You put your lunchbox on shelf."

Jake: "It's good that he's going to start school because he's going to practice lots of things."

"Anything else you would tell him?"
"He needs to have a uniform."

Joshua: "You'll need to be very quiet."

"Anything else?"
"You'll need to listen to the teacher."

Pippa: "What you do [at school]."

"What else?"
"That if she did a mistake they would get the teacher and ask can the new children use a rubber?"

Wylie: "That at [school] you have to be responsible like rabbit [Roy], he didn't give up until he did it."

These children's responses all indicate that they would tell a new child specific information about school or the behaviours you need to display at school. It is interesting to note that Wylie responded in reference to the Roy the Rabbit Story; it may be that he was still thinking about the story which influenced his response to this question.

Six children responded that they would tell a new child school was fun:

Charlie: "Don't be sad it will be lots of fun."

“What else?”

“You can play with me.”

Gemma: “School is very fun.”

Ingrid: “It’s really fun and you get to do handwriting when you’re a three o’clocker.”

Jimmy: “It’s really fun at school.”

“Anything else?”

“He would need to have a school uniform.”

Megan: “It will be fun because you get to learn lots of things.”

“What else?”

“You still get to play because you get some time after food.”

Phoebe: “It’s fun.”

“What else?”

“You need to listen to your teacher.”

“Why do you need to do that?”

“Otherwise you get told off.”

These responses indicate that these children may either enjoy school currently or found school to be fun when they first started.

Four children gave responses based on reassuring the new child about school:

Sarah: “She would turn five, and if she’s scared she can ask her teacher or ask a friend to come play with her and she doesn’t have any friends yet and she comes for school visits.”

Timothy: “That it’s ok if you’re scared, because if you fall over we will help you.”

Winston: “Don’t be worried about all the children.”

Emily: “That it’s very nice.”

“Why is it nice?”

“Because you get to write.”

These responses all reassure a new child about worries that a new child may have when first starting school. It may be that these children were worried about these things themselves when they first started school.

One child did not answer the question:

Jane: “Don’t know.”

This question may have been inappropriate for Jane, as she did not or could not respond.

Overall, this question was effective as children expressed meaningful ideas.

Children predominantly gave reassuring responses that school was “fun” or “nice” or that they should not be “scared” or “worried” or the children thought a new child would need to know about the rules when starting school. Some of the children’s responses may have indicated character strengths that may be necessary to succeed at school.

“What does he/she need to know [about school]?”

This was another question designed to encourage children to place themselves in the other child’s shoes drawing from their own experiences to tell a new child what they might need to know about starting school.

All children responded by saying something they thought a new child might need to know:

Charlie: “Don’t be naughty.”

“Why does he need to know that?”

“Because you’ll go in the step book or the headmaster’s office.”

Emily: “How to write letters properly.”

Fergus: “How to use/hold scissors on the bottom.”

“What else?”

“Not to push people over and not to steal.”

Gemma: “To sit on the mat quietly.”

Imogen: “That you can’t go in swimming pool if the teacher says.”

Ingrid: “What to do [at school].”

Jake: “Lots of words and letters.”

Jimmy: “To be kind to people at school because there’s lots of people.”

Jane: “It’s fun.”

Joshua: “What his numbers are, cos he might be asked four plus four and he might say bunny.”

Megan: “When she first starts she’ll be a one o’clocker¹.”

Phoebe: “Half and counting.”

Pippa: “All the words and what makes sense.”

Sarah: “How to learn to do stuff, to find her own friends so they can be her friends.”

Timothy: “That it’s okay to be scared.”

Winston: “How do you read words?”

Wylie: “What class he’s going to be in.”

“What else?”

“Needs to know if he’s being a good boy, if he didn’t know he might get told off.”

The children’s responses to this question indicate that the question was effective for finding out about what children think a new child would need to know when first starting school.

¹ At some schools in New Zealand, new entrant children finish the school day at one O’clock for several weeks before ending the school day at three O’clock with all other age levels.

Children's responses are predominantly based on rules and regulations of school or general information about school. This question and the one previous are alike in that they both ask children to report on what they think is important about starting school, this may have been repetitive to children as the types of responses given to these two questions are very similar. In future research, only one of these questions should be asked.

What do you think he/she [child in photo] is thinking on the inside?

This question was intended to support children to infer the internal attributes of the child in the photo, and thus to possibly reveal their own internal attributes. It was hoped that the children's inferences would be based on how they felt or what they were apprehensive about when they first started school, that is, that the children would project their own memories about starting school on the child in the photo. A thought bubble was placed next to the photo to help children to do this. Fifteen children inferred logical thoughts of the child in the photo:

Charlie: "Ok then."

Emily: "That she wants to spell words without capital letters in the middle."

Fergus: "I think I'm going to be very good."

Gemma: "She's a bit scared."

Imogen: "She doesn't know what to do everything."

Ingrid: "How to be nice to other people."

"Why is she thinking that?"

"So she's a nice girl at school. So you don't go into the step book², if you don't know about it you still go in it."

² The "step book" is a playground behaviour management programme at the school. If a child misbehaves in the playground they are put onto one of four steps depending on the severity of the behaviour. Consequences vary on each step ranging from a warning to a letter home to parents and principal involvement. Names in the 'step book are cleared every two weeks.

- Megan: “That it might be a bit boring when she’s learning.”
- Phoebe: “One plus one.”

“What else do you think she’ll be “thinking?”
 “The teachers will be nice, it will be fun”
- Jake: “He has to be good at school.”
- Jimmy: “Need to finds some friends to play with.”

“Anything else?”
 “He didn’t know where to go if he hurt himself.”
- Joshua: “I want it to be very good, if it’s not it won’t be very good.”
- Sarah: “What could I do to make new friends? I could go up to talk to them and they could be my friend.”
- Timothy: “It’s ok if he starts school because the teacher will look after him and we will help him too.”
- Winston: “Wished he could go in the pool.”
- Wylie: “He’ll be a good boy, thinks he’s going to be good at writing.”

“Anything else?”
 “He will be very nice to people.”

These children were able to infer logical thoughts of the child in the photo.

The question was inappropriate for Jane and Pippa who gave no response even when prompted.

This question elicited fifteen children (88%) to logically infer what a child might be thinking about starting school. Of those children for whom this question was appropriate character strengths were not directly identifiable from responses. This question may not be necessary, as it does not directly reflect character strengths and children’s responses

previous to this indicate that they may already be thinking about internal attributes and therefore may not need a further question promoting this. Alternatively, the question could ask what the child might be feeling. This might elicit different types of answers from the children.

What would you tell him/her about getting along with others in the playground?

This follow-up question was asked to 13 of the children to determine if they could identify some of the social strengths necessary to get along with others at school. Twelve of the children did identify social strengths:

Charlie: "Don't hurt them, just be nice to them."

Emily: "If she gets lost in another class, she'll go up to the office."

Fergus: "Play with them, and I'll be playing with you too."

Ingrid: "You should not push other people over so they get a wee hole in the middle of their hands."

Jake: "He has to be nice to them."

"Why does he have to be nice to them?"
"Because if he doesn't play nice everyone will get grumpy with him."

Jimmy: "To listen to somebody kind, not to somebody mean, cos they could take you to the wrong place if you get hurt."

Joshua: "Be very nice because if you don't they won't be very nice."

Megan: "When you find some new friends, it will be fun to play with them at play time."

Pippa: "Playing with new friends."

Sarah: "She would go and say would you please come and play with me."

Timothy: “If somebody pushes you over we will take you to the office if you’re bleeding.”

Winston: “Ask people, be nice and ask people.”

For one child this question was inappropriate, as it was unable to be answered:

Phoebe: “Don’t know.”

This question was asked to encourage children to reveal character strengths that are necessary to get along with others. This question was appropriate for most of the children asked and resulted in the identification of social skills associated with character strengths by some of the children. This question may be a good way of evoking descriptions of what children see as important social strengths.

What would you tell him/her about the other children at school?

Nine children were asked if they could give a “group” label reflecting the internal attributes of the other children at school. The question was answered according to the internal attributes of others by four of the children, one of these identified negative characteristics:

Charlie: “They are very nice.”

Emily: “They’re friendly.”

“Anything else?”

“They’ll play with her.”

Fergus: “They’re very good.”

Jimmy: “Some of them aren’t friendly.”

These children were able to identify positive collective attributes of the other children at school and responded accordingly. Conversely, Jimmy identified a negative attribute of

other children at school. This perhaps reflects a different/negative experience with other children at school.

The question was not answered in the way it was intended by five children who instead answered according to external attributes of other children at school or responded according to rules the new child might need to follow:

Ingrid: “You should be nice when you’re doing writing cos you’re not allowed to talk.”

Jake: “He needs to play really nicely.”

Phoebe: “If they get hurt you should help them.”

Pippa: “Their names, where their chair is if they didn’t know.”

Winston: “Some are big so you need to be a wee bit careful.”

This question was limited in its effectiveness for investigating young children’s character strengths; however, it was useful for showing the children’s different levels of understanding. It was also problematic in the sense that some children answered according to what the new child would need to be like; this is possibly due to the way in which the previous questions had been worded. Informing children that for this question they were going to think about the other children at school and then asking them “What are the good things you would tell him/her about the other children at school?” may result in more children responding according to the positive attributes of others which might enable more character strengths to be implied from children’s responses.

What things can you do to get along with this boy/girl?

This question asked eleven children to respond in a way that could reveal their own character strengths. All those asked responded to the question in the way it was intended:

Charlie: “Be very nice.”

Emily: “Help her and show her where to go to the toilet.”

“Why would you do those things?”
“Because it’s very nice.”

Fergus: “Play in the playground with him, or maybe go on the monkey bars or play passes or Busted³.”

“Why would you do that?”
“Because he might want to play them too.”

Jake: “Be nice to him and play with him if I join friends with him.”

Jimmy: “Play with him.”

Joshua: “Play games.”

“What else?”
“Help him if he’s hurt. Tell him what you need to need to do in the playground.”

“Why does he need to know what to do in the playground?”
“Because it’s the school rules and if he does bad stuff he might be in the step books.”

Megan: “I can play with her at play time.”

“Why would you do that?”
“Because she’ll be the new girl.”

Pippa: “They could help them.”

Sarah: “I don’t have any friends either. Can you play with me?”

Timothy: “I could help him a lot.”

Winston: “Play easy games.”

³ Busted is a game that the boys in the class like to play, where one child has his back turned and the other children attempt to creep up on him without getting “busted”/caught.

“What else?”

“Play with some friends so he gets more people to play with.”

This final question based on the First Day of School Photo was appropriate as it enabled all eleven children to respond. Character strengths can be inferred from some of the answers.

Discussion of the Appropriateness of the First Day of School Photo

The use of photos as an aid for answering interview questions was seemingly appropriate and useful. The photo provided a context for which questions could be centred around and gave the children something tangible to base their responses on. Children were not distracted or confused by the photo and their responses reflect that they were able to put themselves in the “child’s shoes”. The First Day of School Photos were a useful aid and would be used again in the future.

Strategy Four - Semi-Structured Interview

The interview was found to be appropriate. Children listened to, and answered the questions, and appeared to be comfortable.

What is the best thing about you?

This question was asked to children without the use of props or visual aids and was intended to assess whether the children could answer a direct question about their internal attributes and character strengths. This question was answered in terms of some internal attribute by 14 of the 17 children (82%). The comments made by children will be discussed in the next chapter. Of all the questions asked to children this was the most effective for

revealing strength of character. Most children were able to answer this question appropriately, and character strengths may be able to be identified in many of the responses.

What are the best things about the other children in your class?

This question was designed to assess whether the young children in this study would be able to describe others internal attributes and character strengths. Thirteen of the children were asked this question. Five children answered the question according to the internal attributes and/or character strengths of the other children:

Jane: "They're friendly."

"Anything else?"
"I know them."

Joshua: "They're very nice, especially [name of child], each party when he's had my phone number he's invited me to his party."

"Anything else?"
"I like everyone in the class."

Phoebe: "They are nice to me."

Sarah: "They always play with people when they're sad, when they're real sad they say" come on you can play with me."

Timothy: "They help me when I'm falling over."

The question evoked eight children to respond generally about the "best things" about others:

Emily: "Because they can do the same as me."

Fergus: "That they like me."

Imogen: "It's [child's name's] birthday today and she invited me to it."

Ingrid: "They like me doing what I just said."

Jake: “It’s good that I made new friends with them when I started school.”

“What else are the best things about the other children?”

“It’s good they like me and some like playing with me and it’s good that everyone likes me if I play nicely.”

Jimmy: “They get to play with me each day and they get to draw.”

Megan: “I have lots of the girls to be friends with and sometimes the boys play with the girls.”

Winston: “They play running races and tag.”

This second follow-up question was not as useful as the previous question for eliciting children to respond according to character strengths. It may be more appropriate to ask children about a specific person rather than “others” in general. Asking children to answer about the best thing about a friend or parent may elicit more character strength-based responses and give better information as to how five-and-a-half to six-year-old children talk about internal attributes.

Discussion of the Appropriateness of the Semi-Structured Interview

Asking children a question outright without the use of props or visual aids may be a developmentally appropriate means of gathering information. All 17 of the children in this study were able to answer the questions when asked directly and did so in an appropriate manner. This is similar to results reported by Marsh et al. who interviewed five to seven year olds using the *Self Description Questionnaire I (SDQ-I)* to assess multiple dimensions of self-concept. They found instruments that used pictorial and opposing verbal explanations to be more confusing than direct interviews alone. It may be that by scheduling the Interview last children were more comfortable both with me and with being interviewed in general and therefore were able to answer the direct questions with more

ease than if they had been asked the questions outright at the start of interviews. Overall, this approach was appropriate and useful at the end of interviews and resulted in valuable information about children's self-perceived character strengths.

General Discussion and Conclusion

The strategies created for the purposes of this study were seemingly appropriate and enjoyed by the children. The interview questions however, need further refinement in order to obtain more useful information as to children's perceptions of character strengths. Overall, the methodology used was appropriate and is a good beginning point for research into children's self-reported character strengths.

Chapter 6

Results

The children's conceptions of character strengths

This chapter sets out how the data was analysed and presents the responses of individual children in order of chronological age. Only answers identified as referring to character strengths are presented. In addition, how each child answered the Semi-Structured Interview question “what is the best thing about you?” will be presented regardless of whether or not character strengths were identified in responses. This is so a clear impression of each child's ability to talk about themselves directly can be given. A general description and overall impression of each child's interview will also be presented. Following the presentation of responses a brief discussion about how each child talked about character strengths will be made.

Data Analysis

Children's responses were analysed using the qualitative software package *QSR Nvivo7*. *NVivo 7* is a computer software package which helps manage, organise, and support data analysis when using a qualitative research design . *NVivo 7* allowed field notes from interviews to be inputted and helped to organise the information, identify and analyse themes. Children's answers to the questions within each strategy were categorised according to how children responded, and made into nodes. A node is a collection of references about a specific theme, place, person or other area of interest . For the purposes of this study, nodes were given the name of character

strengths. For example, all references made by children about continuing doing something despite experiencing problems were coded under the node of perseverance.

To ensure accurate and reliable coding, the *Values in Action (VIA) classification of Character Strengths* was used (see Appendix 1). This classification system is the most widely used in the area of character strengths. New strength categories not in the *VIA Classification of Character Strengths* were also created to better represent the developmental level of the children in this study. In these cases operational definitions were made to ensure they were reliably coded (see Appendix 11). For the purposes of this study the components that make up the character strength of self-regulation as defined by the *VIA Classification of Character Strengths*, namely patience and responsibility, were separated to simplify and therefore better reflect character strengths as they relate to children. The term “affiliation” was also created as a character strength for this study. The *VIA Classification of Character Strengths* uses the terms “social intelligence” and “love” as character strengths that encompass interpersonal strengths. The term affiliation was found to better reflect the young children’s interpersonal strengths and incorporates social intelligence and love into one character strength. Affiliation is defined as the ability to make friends, interact effectively with others and the valuing of close relationships/friendships with others. Independence is another character strength that has been created for the purposes of this study. The *VIA Classification of Character Strengths* does not have

a category that incorporates independence; however, it was felt that in order to obtain a complete picture of the way in which children talk about character strengths, independence be included. Independence has been defined as self-reliance and a sense of autonomy.

Some children talked about themselves in a positive light, however, were deemed not to be indicating strength of character. For example, a child reporting that they were “a very good thing” was considered to be a positive sense of self rather than a strength of character. Some children also reported that they liked to do or could do certain academic tasks for example:

Emily: “I can write little letters.”

In these cases the *VIA Classification of Character Strengths* category of “love of learning” was not recognised as children’s answers were not considered to be reflective of this character strength and instead to reflect a statement of ability and skills rather than a “love” for learning.

Some children also gave several responses that reflected character strengths to the same question, in these instances they were coded as separate, for example:

Megan: “I’m a great friend. I look after the fish
I’ve got at Nanna’s.”

In this instance, “I’m a great friend” and “I look after the fish I’ve got at Nanna’s” were coded as different character strengths in *NVivo 7*.

No character strengths were able to be confidently inferred from the Puppet Scenario; therefore, children’s responses to this part of the interview were excluded from analysis.

Interview Responses

Wylie (5 years, 5 months, 10 days)

Wylie was articulate and friendly. He enjoyed having what he said written down and thought he was “very good and very clever to be helping me”. Wylie’s mother prior to interviews also informed me that Wylie had recently been identified as “gifted” by an educational psychologist.

The character strength of perseverance was recognised in reference to a question from the Roy the Rabbit Story:

Beth⁴: “What did Roy do?”

Wylie: “He tried until he did it.”

This answer reveals that Wylie recognised that Roy did not give up when his carrots were not growing but instead kept trying.

Optimism was implied from one of Wylie’s answers to the Roy the Rabbit Story:

Beth: “What was Roy thinking in his head when he saw the orange tops of the carrots?”

Wylie: “He thought that every time he planted one they would really grow.”

This reveals optimism, as Wylie’s answer is overtly positive; this is particularly evident when contrasted to other children’s responses to this same question, for example:

Fergus: “Maybe it wouldn’t work.”

Timothy: “They will never grow.”

Wylie was also identified as referring directly to responsibility in the first question from the First Day of School Photo:

Beth: “What would you tell this boy about starting school?”

⁴ Name of interviewer

Wylie: “That at [school] you have to be responsible like rabbit, he didn’t give up until he did it.”

Wylie uses the word “responsible” directly to explain what he would tell a new child about starting school. It is uncertain, however, what Wylie understands about the strength of responsibility, as his explanation of it is referring more to the strength of perseverance than responsibility. It may be that Wylie heard the word responsible in the Roy the Rabbit Story and was simply repeating it here.

The character strength of kindness was identified in a follow-up question in reference to the First Day of School Photo question:

Beth: “What do you think he is thinking on the inside?”

Wylie: “He will be very nice to people.”

In this response kindness has been identified by Wylie’s use of the word “nice”.

The character strength of kindness was also identified in reference to Wylie himself in the Semi-Structured Interview:

Beth: “What are the best things about you?”

Wylie: “If someone gets hurt, I’ll make sure they’re alright. Like today my friend was crying cos he didn’t bring his books back, so I gave him Flopsy, it’s my favourite friend. It’s not real though.”

The character strength of kindness was identified in Wylie by his statement that he looks after others.

Four character strengths were identified from all of Wylie’s responses (see Appendix 12 for transcript). Character strengths were largely inferred from Wylie’s answers; however, he did use the terms “nice” and “responsible”, which may reveal he has a developing understanding of trait labels. Wylie was able to infer the thoughts of the characters, however, did so in the third person. Wylie predominantly referred to the

character strengths of others, however, talked about his own character strengths in the Semi-Structured Interview. Wylie appears to have a developing understanding of his positive attributes and his sense of self.

Phoebe (5 years, 5 months, 16 days)

Phoebe took time when answering questions and spoke quietly during the interview. Phoebe particularly liked the puppets, and asked if she could have a turn using them.

The first character strength identified in Phoebe's responses was patience; this was made in reference to the Roy the Rabbit Story:

Beth: "What did Roy do?"

Phoebe: "Waited and waited."

Phoebe identified that Roy displayed patience in the Roy the Rabbit Story by stating that Roy "waited". It could however also be argued that this response is a re-telling of the events of the story thus not revealing an understanding that Roy was patient.

The character strength of self-regulation was also identified in a question from the First Day of School Photo.

Beth: "What would you tell this girl about starting school?"

Phoebe: "You need to listen to your teacher."

Beth: "Why do you need to do that?"

Phoebe: "Otherwise you get told off."

Phoebe refers to self-regulation as she realises the need for a child starting school to follow the rules/listen in order to avoid getting into trouble.

Phoebe responded in the following way in the Semi-Structured Interview:

Beth: "What is the best thing about you?"

Phoebe: "I can do a trick on my scooter"

Phoebe is identifying her own physical abilities and skills in this response.

The character strength of kindness was identified in relation to Phoebe in a follow-up question:

Beth: “What else is a best thing about you?”

Phoebe: “I am nice to people.”

Kindness has been identified in this instance by the way in which Phoebe recognises that she is “nice” to others.

Phoebe was also identified as referring to the kindness of others in the second question of the Semi-Structured Interview:

Beth: “What are the best things about the other children in your class?”

Phoebe: “They are nice to me.”

Phoebe again uses the word “nice” in this answer; in this instance it is used to describe the kindness of others in her class.

Three different character strengths were identified from Phoebe’s answers (see Appendix 13 for transcript). Character strengths were predominantly implied; however, Phoebe used the word “nice” as a trait label in reference to both herself and others. Phoebe was able to infer thoughts in the inference-based questions, however, did so in the third person. Phoebe’s answers to the First Day of School Photo, emphasised rules and the consequences for breaking them, this is consistent with Piaget and Kohlberg’s theories of moral development which purport that children at the age of five tend to be preoccupied with rules and the consequences for breaking them. In the Semi-Structured Interview Phoebe referred to both a physical ability and a positive internal attribute.

Jake (5 years, 5 months, 18 days)

Jake was hard to understand at times during the interview and avoided eye contact. Jake appeared to be eager and willing to participate and stayed attentive throughout the interview.

The character strength of optimism was implied in one of Jake's responses to the Roy the Rabbit Story:

Beth: "What was Roy thinking in his head when his carrots weren't ready to pick?"

Jake: "The carrots might grow soon."

Jake's response indicates optimism in that he refers to a hopeful and positive future. This is in contrast to other children's pessimistic/negative outlooks of the future whereby the carrots might not grow at all. For example:

Sarah: "He was thinking they wouldn't grow."

The character strength of affiliation was evident in reference to Jake in the First Day of School Photo:

Beth: "What things can you do to get along with this boy?"

Jake: "Play with him if I join friends with him."

Affiliation was also identified in several follow-up questions to the Semi-Structured Interview:

Beth: "What are the best things about the other children in your class?"

Jake: "It's good that I made new friends with them when I started school."

Beth: "What else [is a best thing about the other children in your class]?"

Jake: "It's good they like me and some like playing with me and it's good that everyone likes me if I play nicely."

Beth: "What else [is the best thing about you]?"

Jake: "It's good that I can play nicely."

Affiliation has been identified in these responses as Jake reveals a valuing of friendship with others, an understanding of the need to get along with others and the recognition that this ability is a "best thing" about himself. It is important to note however, that in one of Jake's responses this friendship is conditional, in that, Jake would play with a new child at school only if he "joined friends with him".

The character strength of kindness was also referred to in the First Day of School

Photo:

Beth: "What would you tell him/her about getting along with others in the playground?"

Jake: "He has to be nice to them."

Beth: "Why does he have to be nice to them?"

Jake: "Because if he doesn't play nice everyone will get grumpy with him."

Beth: "What things can you do to get along with this boy?"

Jake: "Be nice to him."

Jake makes reference to the need for the character strength of kindness in these responses by saying that to get along with others you need to be "nice" and states the reason you need to be nice is so the other children do not get "grumpy". It may be that this response is in reference to something that Jake has learnt. That is, that if you do not "play nicely" others will be "grumpy", so Jake has perhaps learnt that being kind is a good way to get along with others.

The character strength of self-regulation was also identified in reference to a question from the First Day of School Photo:

Beth: "What does he need to know?"

Jake: “He has to be good at school.”

Jake refers to the need for self-regulation at school, by saying that a new child would need to “be good”.

Jake said the following in response to the initial Semi-Structured Interview question:

Beth: “What is the best thing about you?”

Jake: “When I get up on the bed.”

In this answer Jake is referring to something he may like doing rather than to an internal attribute.

Jake was unable to answer many of the questions logically throughout the interview; however, three character strengths were able to be identified from his responses (see Appendix 14 for transcript). Jake used the trait label of “nice” to describe kindness. All other character strengths were inferred. Jake was able to put himself in the other character’s shoes in the various inference-based questions. He did this in the third person. In the Semi-Structured Interview Jake identified his ability to play nicely with other children.

Ingrid (5 years, 5 months, 19 days)

Ingrid was a friendly and talkative child who asked a lot of questions and seemed to enjoy talking with me. Ingrid was more focussed on general conversation than the interview at times.

The first character strength identified from Ingrid’s responses was independence in the Roy the Rabbit Story:

Beth: “What was Roy thinking in his head when he saw the orange tops of the carrots?”

Ingrid: “He thought he was going to pick them by himself.”

Independence in this case is being referred to by Ingrid about Roy. Picking carrots “by himself” indicates this character strength, as it refers to Roy being autonomous and doing this activity on his own.

Patience was also a character strength made in reference to the Roy the Rabbit Story by Ingrid:

Beth: “What did Roy do?”

Ingrid: “He waited and waited after school.”

In response to this question, Ingrid identified that Roy displayed the character strength of patience in that he “waited” for his carrots to grow. This response however, could also be implied to be a retelling of the events of the story and not a recognition of patience.

The character strength of kindness was also identified in the First Day of School Photo:

Beth: “What do you think she is thinking on the inside?”

Ingrid: “How to be nice to other people.”

Beth: “Why is she thinking that?”

Ingrid: “So she’s a nice girl at school. So you don’t go into the step book, if you don’t know about it you still go in it.”

Ingrid referred to kindness again by the word “nice” in this instance Ingrid mentions kindness as a character strength a new girl at school might need to possess. It is possible that in this response the word “nice” is also used in place of “good” that is that Ingrid recognises the need for a new entrant child to be good to avoid punishment.

Ingrid was also identified as revealing the character strength of affiliation in herself:

Beth: “What is the best thing about you?”

Ingrid: “I play nicely and I like to play nicely and I like to be a wicked witch.”⁵

Ingrid is referring to affiliation by identifying that she “plays nicely” and enjoys playing with others.

Four character strengths were identified in Ingrid’s answers (see Appendix 15 for transcript). All character strengths were inferred except for kindness, which was recognised by the word “nice”. Ingrid mentioned consequences in reference to kindness, that is, that the reason you would be kind is to avoid punishment. This is indicative of Piaget and Kohlberg’s theories of moral development for a child of this age. Ingrid was able to identify a positive attribute of herself in the Semi-Structured Interview.

Charlie (5 years, 5 months, 28 days)

Charlie was a friendly child who was eager to answer questions. Charlie was the last to be interviewed on one of the interviewing days. On this day, the teacher had forgotten to inform me that the class was going on a trip. Due to this, Charlie’s interview had time constraints. The interview however, did not appear to suffer because of this, and Charlie remained focussed on the questions throughout the interview. This in itself reveals strength of character in Charlie.

The need for self-regulation in others was identified in the First Day of School

Photo:

Beth: “What does he need to know?”

Charlie: “Don’t be naughty.”

Beth: “Why does he need to know that?”

⁵ By saying that she likes to play the “wicked witch” Ingrid is referring to an imaginary game that the girls in the class play, much like a fairytale where one child will be the princess and another a wicked witch. This is therefore a reference to cooperative play with others and not to Isabella liking to be “wicked” herself.

Charlie: “Because you’ll go in the step-book or the headmaster’s office.”

Charlie also mentions self-regulation in reference to himself in the Semi-Structured

Interview:

Beth: “What are the best things about you?”

Charlie: “I’m a good boy at school.”

Beth: “What else [is a best thing about you]?”

Charlie: “I’m good at sitting on the mat and focussing. Most of the time I am, but sometimes not.”

In the first answer to the First Day of School Photo, Charlie is mentioning the need for a new child to be aware that they need to behave and is able to state that this is because there are consequences if you do not. Charlie first refers to self-regulation in the Semi-Structured Interview by stating that he is a “good boy” which, in this context was implied to mean well-behaved and implies he follows the rules. Charlie also responded that he was good at “sitting on the mat and focussing” which again requires self-regulation.

Kindness was another character strength identified in two of the follow-up questions for the First Day of School Photo:

Beth: “What would you tell him about getting along with others in the playground?”

Charlie: “Don’t hurt them, just be nice to them.”

Beth: “What would you tell him about the other children at school?”

Charlie: “They are very nice.”

Charlie refers to the need to be “nice” at school in order to get along with others as well as identifying that the other children in his class are “nice”. Charlie’s responses also reveal character strengths that reflect Charlie himself. Kindness is reflected in the First Day of School Photo:

Beth: “What things can you do to get along with this boy?”

Charlie: “Be very nice.”

Charlie refers to kindness here by stating that, to get along with others, he would be “nice”.

Charlie also mentions humour in reference to himself in the Semi-Structured Interview when asked if there is anything else that is a “best thing” about him:

Beth: “Anything else?”

Charlie: “I’m very funny you know.”

In this answer Charlie directly recognised himself as being “funny” and therefore the character strength of humour has been identified.

Three character strengths were inferred from Charlie’s responses (see Appendix 16 for transcript). The character strength of kindness was referred to by the label “nice”. In contrast to some of the other children in this study, Charlie appears to be perceptive about his positive attributes. In addition, Charlie was able to acknowledge that he is not always good at sitting on the mat and focussing. According to the literature young children’s self-descriptions tend to be positive and unbalanced. Charlie’s response therefore, is not typical of a child this age as it is not until approximately eight years of age that children begin to criticise the self. Charlie was the only child who identified humour as one of their “best things”. Humour comes under the virtue of transcendence, which embodies strengths that “forge connections” (Peterson and Seligman, 2004). Charlie is also indicative of Piaget and Kohlberg’s first stages of moral development by indicating a child starting school would need to be well-behaved to avoid consequences. Charlie appears to have a good understanding of his positive attributes and to be developing his sense of self.

Emily (5 years, 6 months, 13 days)

Emily was a friendly and talkative child. Emily seemed to enjoy talking with me, and told me all about what they were doing that afternoon at school. At times Emily needed to be focussed away from general conversation by me towards the interview questions.

The affiliation of others was implied in a follow up question to the First Day of School Photo:

Beth: “What would you tell her about the other children at school?”

Emily: “They’re friendly.”

Beth: “Anything else?”

Emily: “They’ll play with her.”

In this answer, Emily is recognised as commenting on the character strength of affiliation, as she is able to acknowledge that the other children at school are “friendly” and would befriend the new entrant child.

The character strength of kindness was also identified in a follow-up question from the First Day of School Photo about Emily herself:

Beth: “What things can you do to get along with this girl?”

Emily: “Help her and show her where to go to the toilet.”

Beth: “Why would you do those things?”

Emily: “Because it’s very nice.”

The character strength of kindness is evident in this answer as Emily states that she would help a new child starting school, which is a “kind” thing to do; in addition, Emily is also able to state that she would do this because it is “nice”.

The character strength of affiliation was identified in Emily in the Semi-Structured Interview:

Beth: “What is the best thing about you?”

Emily: "I made friends."

In this response the character strength of affiliation is referred to as Emily states that one of the best things about her is that she has made friends

In addition to the above answer, Emily also said the following was a "best thing" about her:

Beth: "What else [is a best thing about you]?"

Emily: "I can write little letters."

In this instance Emily is referring to a general ability/skill and therefore not a strength of character.

Two character strengths were inferred from Emily's answers (see Appendix 17 for transcript). Emily also used various labels that were identified as character strengths such as "friendly", "nice" and "help". Emily was able to infer the thoughts of the characters in the third person. In the Semi-Structured Interview Emily talked about her positive attributes in addition to a general ability/skill.

Jimmy (5 years, 6 months, 15 days)

Jimmy was eager to participate in this interview and was disappointed when another child was called before him. During the Roy the Rabbit Story Jimmy tried to read along. He was told that he should just listen because it was quite tricky. Reading along to the story may have had an impact on Jimmy's ability to answer the questions based on this strategy, as his attention may have been on reading rather than the content of the story. Jimmy remained focussed and attentive for the duration of the interview.

Jimmy implied the necessity for the character strength of kindness in the First Day of School Photo:

Beth: “What does he need to know?”

Jimmy: “To be kind to people at school because there’s lots of people.”

The strength label “kind” was used directly by Jimmy as he explained that this was something that a new child would need to be.

The character strength of affiliation was also identified in reference to Jimmy himself in the First Day of School Photo:

Beth: “What things can you do to get along with this boy?”

Jimmy: “Play with him.”

Jimmy’s willingness to befriend a new child to ensure that he gets along with him further reveals the character strength of affiliation.

In the Semi-Structured Interview Jimmy responded in the following way:

Beth: “What is the best thing about you?”

Jimmy: “I know how to write.”

In this answer, Jimmy identifies that the best thing about himself is a general ability/skill.

Two character strengths were recognised from Jimmy’s responses (see Appendix 18 for transcript). Jimmy used the trait label “kind” directly in reference to others and affiliation was implied in another answer. Jimmy was able to infer the thoughts of others in the third person. Jimmy was identified as inferring character strengths of himself in the First Day of School Photo, however, in the Semi-Structured interview; Jimmy did not refer to a positive internal attribute/character strength.

Pippa (5 years, 7 months, 2 days)

During the interview Pippa had a tendency to become distracted by her class, and to start listening in on what her teacher was saying rather than paying attention to the questions. It may be that this lack of attention affected the way in which she responded to interview questions.

Self-regulation was identified in response to a follow-up question to the Roy the Rabbit Story:

Beth: "What are the best things about Roy?"

Pippa: "Because he didn't pick them [carrots] he waited until his mum said he could."

Self-regulation has been identified as Pippa is able to state that one of the best things about Roy was that he restrained from picking the carrots, only doing so when his mother said it was okay.

Pippa answered the Semi-Structured Interview question in the following way:

Beth: "What is the best thing about you?"

Pippa: "We are very good because we can listen."

Beth: "What is a best thing about you?"

Pippa: "Because I know lots of things."

Pippa first misunderstood this question, responding according to the First Day of School Photo. It was then explained to Pippa that this question was different and was asking Pippa about herself. After this explanation, Pippa was then re-asked the question and responded that the "best thing" about herself was her general knowledge.

One character strength was implied from Pippa's responses (see Appendix 19 for transcript). Pippa made no references to the internal attributes/character strengths of herself. Pippa was able to infer the thoughts of the characters in the third person. It may be

that Pippa has not yet developed an understanding of or was unable to articulate her positive attributes in the interview.

Imogen (5 years, 7 months, 11 days)

Imogen had been absent from school the two days prior to the interview. During the Puppet Scenario Imogen became unfocussed and stared off into space, and it was observed that in response to the First Day of School Photo Imogen appeared to be tired and became somewhat reluctant to answer questions. It may be that these factors impacted on the way in which Imogen responded to interview questions.

Two instances of perseverance were identified in Imogen's responses to questions from the Roy the Rabbit Story:

Beth: "What did Roy do?"

Imogen: "He kept looking after them."

Beth: "What are the best things about Roy?"

Imogen: "He kept growing the seeds until they grewed."

The character strength of perseverance was one the book was trying to portray. Imogen identified that Roy persevered by the way he kept looking after and growing his carrots. This goes beyond retelling of the story as Imogen recognises that Roy's perseverance is one of the best things about him.

Imogen responded in the following ways to the Semi-Structured Interview question:

Beth: "What is the best thing about you?"

Imogen: "Because I was sick yesterday, and today I'm better."

Beth: "What else?"

Imogen: "I eat healthy food."

Imogen's first answer to this question was based on the fact that she was no longer sick, and her second answer may indicate that Imogen believes she is now better because she ate healthy food, or that she identifies that she is a "good girl" because she eats healthy food. In either case, it is a recognition that this behaviour is positive rather than a strength of character.

One character strength related to others was identified from Imogen's responses (see Appendix 20 for transcript). Imogen was able to infer the thoughts of the characters in the third person in some but not all strategies. In the Semi-Structured Interview Imogen revealed a positive behaviour, but did not refer to strength of character.

Winston (5 years, 7 months, 28 days)

Winston was quiet and compliant during the interview; he was a quiet child and seemed happy to and comfortable when answering questions.

The character strength of affiliation was identified in two of Winston's answers to the First Day of School Photo in reference to himself:

Beth: "What things can you do to get along with this boy?"

Winston: "Play easy games."

Beth: "What else?"

Winston: "Play with some friends so he gets more people to play with."

Winston's responses infer the character strength of affiliation, revealing an understanding of how to get along with and befriend others his own age.

Winston later responded to the Semi-Structured Interview question in the following ways:

Beth: "What is the best thing about you?"

Winston: "Playing soccer."

Beth “What else?”

Winston: “Swimming and monkey bars, the yellow ones⁶.”

In these answers, Winston identified that the “best things” about himself were his physical abilities and skills.

One character strength, affiliation, was inferred from Winston’s responses (see Appendix 21 for transcript). Winston was able to put himself in the character’s shoes and infer their thoughts in the first person. Winston’s answer to the Semi-Structured Interview question reveal a positive sense of self and may indicate that he identifies himself by his physical abilities rather than his internal attributes at the time of the interview.

Gemma (5 years, 8 months, 13 days)

Gemma was quiet and somewhat reserved during the interview. She was willing to answer questions, however, may not have answered them to the extent she would have had she been feeling less shy and more familiar with me.

The character strength of self-regulation was identified in a response to one of the questions from the First Day of School Photo:

Beth: “What does she need to know?”

Gemma: “To sit on the mat quietly.”

In this answer, Gemma refers to self-regulation by saying that a child starting school would need to know how to behave, that is, that self-regulation is a character strength this child would need to acquire.

Gemma responded in the following way to the Semi-Structured Interview question:

Gemma: “I can play on the monkey bars very well.”

Beth: “Anything else?”

⁶ The yellow monkey bars are the more challenging ones at the school.

Gemma: “I’m a very good thing.”

Gemma firstly referred to the “best thing” about herself as being a physical ability, then when asked again responded in a way that has been identified as a positive sense of self, rather than a strength of character.

One character strength was identified from Gemma’s responses (see Appendix 22 for transcript). Gemma was able to infer the thoughts of characters in the third person. In the Semi-Structured Interview Gemma did not refer to her own character strengths, however, a positive sense of self was identified. Gemma may as yet be unable to articulate her positive attributes or was unable to do so in this interview.

Jane (5 years, 9 months, 12 days)

Jane appeared to be disinterested in participating in the interview, and would often remain silent after being asked questions. Jane was also focussed on her class and what they were doing and continually played with stickers she had been given by the dental nurse. It may be that Jane did not feel comfortable talking with me or would have preferred to be in class. This may have affected the way in which Jane responded to the interview questions.

The first character strength identified from Jane’s responses was perseverance in reference to a question from the Roy the Rabbit Story:

Beth: “What did Roy do?”

Jane: “He had to keep on watching.”

This answer implies perseverance as Jane recognised that instead of giving up on the carrots Roy persisted and kept watching them. This response could also be interpreted as story retelling rather than recognition of perseverance.

The second character strength implied by Jane was affiliation in response to the

Interview:

Beth: “What are the best things about the other children in your class?”

Jane: “They’re friendly.”

Affiliation was inferred as Jane identified that the other children in her class were “friendly” which is a direct reflection of this character strength.

In the Semi-Structured Interview Jane responded in the following ways:

Beth: “What is the best thing about you?”

Jane: “I can do some puzzles.”

Beth: “What else?”

Jane: “I can play with my brother and sisters.”

Beth: “Anything else?”

Jane: “I can play games with mummy and daddy.”

Jane’s answers to this question were all based around things she could do rather than internal attributes.

Two character strengths were identified from Jane’s responses (see Appendix 23 for transcript). Jane used the label “friendly” directly which was recognised as affiliation. No character strengths were inferred about Jane herself. In the inference-based questions Jane was able to infer the thoughts of characters in the third person.

Sarah (5 years, 9 months, 12 days)

Sarah was talkative and friendly during the interview and appeared to be quite extroverted.

The character strength of affiliation was identified from Sarah's answers. This character strength was recognised in three separate responses. Sarah referred to the affiliation of others in the Semi-Structured Interview in a follow-up question:

- Beth: "What are the best things about the other children in your class?"
- Sarah: "They always play with people when they're sad; when they're real sad they say 'come on you can play with me.'"

The character strength of affiliation was also identified when referring to herself. The first instance was in response to the First Day of School Photo:

- Beth: "What things can you do to get along with this girl?"
- Sarah: "Say 'I don't have any friends either. Can you play with me?'"

The second reference was in the Semi-Structured Interview:

- Beth: "What is the best thing about you?"
- Sarah: "I always like playing with my friends. If they don't have anyone to play with, I will play with them."

Affiliation has been identified in Sarah as she emphasises friendship and befriending others. In one of Sarah's answers she says, "I don't have any friends either", due to the information gained from the larger Children's Learning Study and from general talk with Sarah herself before and after interviews it was clear that Sarah does have friends, and appears to be a popular member of the class. It may be that Sarah used the wrong words when responding to this question or what she meant by this comment was that a new girl would say this to another child at the school.

The character strength of affiliation was inferred from many of Sarah's responses (see Appendix 24 for transcript). Interpersonal strengths may be an area that Sarah excels in. Sarah was able to put herself directly in the character's shoes in the inference-based

questions from the First Day of School Photo, answering these questions in the first person. In the Semi-Structured Interview Sarah was identified as recognising the character strength of affiliation in herself.

Timothy (5 years, 11 months, 2 days)

Timothy was a quiet child, who only spoke when he was asked questions. This did not appear to impact on the way in which Timothy responded, as he appeared to be comfortable and willing to answer all of the questions.

The first reference to a character strength was to kindness in the Semi-Structured Interview:

Beth: “What are the best things about the other children in your class?”

Timothy: “They help me when I’m falling over.”

This is a direct reference to the kindness of others, in that Timothy recognises that one of the best things about the others in his class is that they help him, which is a kind thing to do.

The character strength of kindness in Timothy was also identified. First in the First Day of School Photo and then in the Semi-Structured Interview:

Beth: “What would you tell this boy about starting school?”

Timothy: “That it’s ok if you’re scared, because if you fall over we will help you.”

Beth: “What do you think he is thinking on the inside?”

Timothy: “It’s ok if he starts school because the teacher will look after him and we will help him too.”

Beth: “What would you tell him about getting along with others in the playground?”

Timothy: “If somebody pushes you over we will take you to the office if you’re bleeding.”

Beth: “What things can you do to get along with this boy?”

Timothy: “I could help him a lot.”

Beth: “What are the best things about you?”

Timothy: “I help people when they fall over.”

These references to kindness are predominantly centred on helping others particularly when they fall over. It may be that Timothy had a recent experience of falling over and being helped by others.

The character strength of justice/fairness was identified in Timothy in response to the Semi-Structured Interview:

Beth: “What else is a best thing about you?”

Timothy: “When some boys are chasing after girls I tell them don’t.”

Timothy refers to his own sense of justice/fairness in this answer as he recognises that chasing after girls is not “right”, and he acts according to this principle by telling the boys who do the chasing to stop.

Two character strengths were identified from Timothy’s responses (see Appendix 25 for transcript). Timothy predominantly used the word “help” which was recognised as kindness. Timothy also mentions falling over a lot. Timothy was the only child who was recognised as referring to justice/fairness; this was done in reference to Timothy himself. This is a complex character strength. Justice/fairness is a cognitive character strength based on moral reasoning, whereby an individual must determine what is morally right or wrong and act accordingly . According to Piaget and Kohlberg this is a more complex stage of moral development. Timothy was able to infer the thoughts of others in the inference-based questions in the third person.

Megan (5 years, 11 months, 11 days)

Megan was shy at the start of the interview; however, as the interview went on she became more comfortable and confident.

Self-regulation was identified in reference to the Roy the Rabbit Story:

Beth: "What are the best things about Roy?"

Megan: "That he listened to his mum."

Megan was able to identify that one of the best things about Roy in the story was that he "listened". Listening and doing what you are told comes under the character strength of self-regulation.

The character strength of affiliation was recognised in some of Megan's responses in references to herself during the First Day of School Photo and Semi-Structured Interview:

Beth: "What things can you do to get along with this girl?"

Megan: "I can play with her at play time."

Beth: "Why would you do that?"

Megan: "Because she'll be the new girl."

Beth: "What are the best things about you?"

Megan: "I'm a great friend."

Beth: "What are the best things about the other children in your class?"

Megan: "I have lots of the girls to be friends with and sometimes the boys play with the girls."

Megan refers to affiliation in various ways in her answers. She firstly recognises that to get along with a new girl she could play with her, as she would not have any friends yet, that is, "would be the new girl". Megan however, also refers to being a good friend directly as one

of the best things about herself, and refers to the fact that she has friends and values their friendship all of which reflect the character strength of affiliation.

Megan also makes reference to herself as being responsible in the Semi-Structured Interview:

Beth: "What are the best things about you?"

Megan: "I look after the fish I've got at Nana's"

In this answer, Megan recognises that it is a good thing that she looks after the fish she has at her grandmother's house.

Megan was asked if there were any other "best things" about herself in the interview, her response to this follow-up question referred to kindness:

Beth: "Anything else?"

Megan: "I'm nice."

In this answer, Megan also identifies that she is "nice" which as previously mentioned can be interpreted as a reference to kindness.

Four character strengths were recognised from Megan's responses (see Appendix 26 for transcript). Not all character strengths were inferred. Megan used labels for herself such as by saying she was a "great friend" and "nice". Megan was also able to give an insightful reason as to why she would play with a new child at school and was able to identify that the fact she was responsible was a positive attribute. It may be that Megan has a more developed sense of self than some of the other children in this study, or was more able to articulate this during the interview.

Joshua (6 years, 11 days)

Joshua was polite, bright and bubbly during the interview. His mother had told me that he was looking forward to helping me out with my research, and this eagerness came across during the interview.

The character strength of self-regulation was recognised in the First Day of School

Photo:

Beth: “What would you tell this boy about starting school?”

Joshua: “You’ll need to be very quiet.”

Beth: “Anything else?”

Joshua: “You’ll need to listen to the teacher.”

Self-regulation in this answer has been identified as Joshua refers to the need to follow the rules/school expectations of being quiet and listening.

The character strength of kindness was also identified in the First Day of School

Photo and Semi-Structured Interview:

Beth: “What would you tell him about getting along with others in the playground?”

Joshua: “Be very nice because if you don’t they won’t be very nice.”

Beth: “What are the best things about the other children in your class?”

Joshua: “They’re very nice, especially [name of child], each party when he’s had my phone number he’s invited me to his party.”

Joshua refers to kindness again by the term “nice”; in this instance Joshua mentions that in order to get along with others it is necessary to be kind. Joshua also recognised the kindness of a friend in his second answer. The character strength of kindness was also identified in himself in response to a question from the First Day of School Photo and Semi-Structured Interview:

Beth: “What things can you do to get along with this boy?”

Joshua: “Help him if he’s hurt

Beth: “What else [is a best thing about you]?”

Joshua: “I’m really really nice to [name of child], he’s the nicest to me, and I’m the nicest to him”

Kindness has been recognised by the statement that Joshua would “help” the new child if they were hurt, and by the statement that his is “nice” to his friend.

Joshua also referred to the character strength of affiliation to refer to himself in the Interview:

Beth: “What are the best things about you?”

Joshua: “I have thousands and hundreds and millions of friends.”

In this response, Joshua reveals a valuing of friendship by recognising that one of the best things about himself is that he has many friends.

Three character strengths were identified in Joshua’s responses (see Appendix 27 for transcript). Character strengths were predominantly inferred with the exception of kindness, which was identified by the label “nice”. Joshua emphasised the need to follow the rules, which follows Piaget , and Kohlberg’s theories of moral development. Joshua was able to infer the thoughts of characters in the various strategies in the first person, revealing an ability to place himself directly in another’s shoes. In addition, in the Semi-Structured Interview Joshua was able to identify a character strength in himself.

Fergus (6 years, 20 days)

Fergus was attentive during the entire interview, and remained focussed on questions even when a boy in one of the classes was reprimanded by the class teacher.

The character strength of perseverance was identified in the Roy the Rabbit Story:

Beth: “What did Roy do?”

Fergus: “Kept waiting and watering them.”

Fergus refers to the perseverance that Roy displayed in the story, by saying that Roy kept on waiting and watering his carrots. Again, this could also be implied to be a re-telling of the story not recognition of perseverance.

Self-regulation was implied in reference to a question from the First Day of School

Photo:

Beth: “What would you tell this boy about starting school?”

Fergus: “Be good or you won’t get presents.”

Fergus referred to self-regulation by being “good”. That is, Fergus thought he would tell a new child to “be good” as there were consequences for not doing so. It is important to put this answer in context. The time of the year interviews were completed was three weeks before Christmas, and therefore this answer identifying loss of presents as a consequence reflects this season.

Fergus also made responses about himself that reflected affiliation in the First Day of School Photo and Semi-Structured Interview:

Beth: “What would you tell him about getting along with others in the playground?”

Fergus: “Play with them, and I’ll be playing with you too.”

Beth: “What things can you do to get along with this boy?”

Fergus: “Play in the playground with him, or maybe go on the monkey bars or play passes or Busted.”

Beth: “Why would you do that?”

Fergus: “Because he might want to play them too.”

Beth: "What are the best things about you?"

Fergus: "I know how to play with people very nicely."

Beth: "What else [is a best thing about you]?"

Fergus: "I like playing with other people who I meet."

Fergus emphasises befriending others by playing with them in these answers, as well as an understanding that he knows how to play with others well and values/enjoys having friends.

Three character strengths were identified from Fergus' answers (see Appendix 28 for transcript). All character strengths were inferred from Fergus' responses as no labels were used. Fergus stated the reason behind being "good" in one of his answers was to avoid a negative consequence. This is consistent with Piaget and Kohlberg's theories of moral development. Fergus was able to infer the character's thoughts in the third person. Fergus' response to the Semi-Structured interview revealed a strength of character.

Chapter 7

Discussion

The study of character strengths is in its infancy, and as such, there is very little research on character strengths as they relate to children. The purpose of this research was to conduct an exploratory study investigating five-and-a-half to six-year-old children's capacity to talk about the character strengths of themselves and others. Using a qualitative research design utilising four specially created strategies, children's voices were heard in individual interviews using open-ended questions. This chapter will firstly present the general findings of the study. This will be followed by an exploration of the three character strengths most mentioned by children. The developmental considerations of this study will then be examined followed by a discussion of the social nature of character strengths. The studies limitations and future directions will be considered then a general conclusion to this thesis will be made.

Summary of Findings

Overall ten different character strengths were identified in children's responses to questions. All children in the study were identified as indicating at least one character strength. A summary of the character strengths referred to by children can be seen in Table 2. Character strengths were predominantly inferred from children's responses; however, a few of the children used trait terms such as kind, nice, friendly and responsible. The most commonly identified character strengths from children's responses were kindness, affiliation and self-regulation. Children made the most references to the affiliation, kindness and self-regulation of others and the most mentions to affiliation and kindness in reference to themselves. The children's self-descriptions in response to the Semi-Structured Interview question "What is the best thing about you?" were varied. Four children (23.5%)

named only external attributes or skills, four children (23.5%) made reference to external attributes/skills and character strengths and nine children (53%) referred only to their positive sense of self or character strengths. Three different stages/levels unrelated to chronological age emerged as to how the children talked about character strengths. Two children (Charlie and Megan) were able to talk about the character strengths of others as well as themselves, used some trait labels, and revealed a deeper understanding and insight into their positive internal attributes than the other children in the study. The majority of the children were identified as inferring several of the most commonly identified character strengths and revealed they were beginning to understand positive internal attributes. Three children (Pippa, Gemma and Winston) were found to talk about one character strength and did not talk about their own character strengths/internal attributes during interviews. Overall children appeared to be on the cusp of being able to understand and talk about the character strengths of themselves and others.

Study Findings in Relation to the Literature

The finding that children were able to give their perceptions of character strengths is similar to what others have found about children's abilities to give their self-perceptions in a variety of different domains. Eder in her study of the structure and content of three-and-a-half to seven-and-a-half year olds concepts of themselves and others found that over 90% of children were able to answer questions about the behaviours of themselves and others, when asked a series of opposing statements by puppets. Furthermore, Eder found that even the three-and-a-half year olds in the study were able to describe the internal attributes and emotions of themselves and others; in fact, 60% of their responses to trait-based questions were answered with a trait-based response. This is similar to the children in this study who

predominantly, when asked what the best thing was about themselves, gave a response related to their positive internal attributes.

Results from the present study are also similar to those found by Measelle and colleagues using the *Berkeley Puppet Interview (BPI)*. Measelle and colleagues studied children's views of their social, emotional and academic competence finding study children to have an understanding (self-concept) of their competence in the social, emotional and academic domains. Whilst the present study differs to Measelle and colleagues results were similar, in that, children in this study were also found to have the beginnings of an understanding of their self-concept

Children in the current study were found to be able to infer the thoughts and feelings of Roy the Rabbit, this finding is similar to those of Heyman and Gelman who demonstrated that children as young as four years of age when asked questions based on characters in a story were able to make psychological inferences.

Rotenberg found the youngest children in his study at five years of age accurately identified the characteristics of a character in a series of stories. In a second experiment Rotenberg found the children in the study aged between five and seven years could provide traits for themselves in a series of sentence-completion tasks. Whilst utilising a different methodology the current study also found children were able to identify positive characteristics of a story character (Roy) and were beginning to use trait terms to describe themselves without any prior exposure to terms or prompting.

Marsh and colleagues who used the *Self Description Questionnaire for Preschoolers (SDQ-P)* with four to five year olds to measure self-concept also found the children in the study could talk about their self-perceptions, describing the young children in their study as able to distinguish between their self-concept in the domains of physical, appearance, peers, parent, verbal and math ability.

Not all 24 of the character strengths of the *VIA Classification of Strengths* were identified from children's responses. The more abstract character strengths requiring cognitive maturation such as wisdom, mercy, humility, prudence, appreciation of beauty, gratitude and spirituality were absent from children's descriptions. The character strengths that were identified in children's responses are similar to what Park and Peterson found in their study of 690 parents' descriptions of three to nine year olds. In their study the three most commonly identified character strengths by parents were love, kindness, and creativity. Parents did not mention the character strengths of open-mindedness, gratitude, mercy, humility and humour when describing their children. Whilst Park and Peterson did not study children's own perceptions of their character strengths, it is interesting that parental descriptions identified similar character strengths to the children in the current study. The most commonly identified character strengths by the children in this study of kindness, affiliation and self-regulation will now be discussed.

Affiliation

Affiliation was the most commonly identified character strength with responses from 11 children being recognised as indicative of this strength. Affiliation is not a complete character strength as identified by Peterson and Seligman, but incorporates components of the *VIA Classification of Character Strengths* of love and social intelligence to better represent this character strength in children. In this study affiliation referred to; the ability to make friends, interact effectively with others and the valuing of close relationships/friendships with others. Children talked about affiliation in the way that they themselves and others befriended other children by playing with them, valued being invited to parties and to play, and in their ability to get along with others. In order to maintain friendships and relationships with peers, children must learn to play cooperatively, engage

in pro-social behaviours, as well as develop sensitivity to the feelings and needs of others. The identification of the character strength of affiliation is consistent with research by Dockett and Perry who conducted small group interviews with five year old children who had just started school. Interviews revealed an emphasis by children on friends, particularly on the making of friends and the ways in which you would go about doing this. It was also found the children related having friends to how much they liked school.

It might also be that the children in this study were revealing a need for friendship. That is, the emphasis on friendship may be a reflection of the children's concern for feeling lonely or excluded. By the age of five-and-a-half children are aware that having friends is more desirable than not having friends. Research has shown that affiliation helps with school adjustment and happiness as well as being a significant context for other important social strengths to be fostered. Therefore, an alternative explanation and interpretation of the emphasis on affiliation might be a reflection of the children's desire to have friends and the recognition that friends are important.

Kindness

The character strength of kindness was identified in 10 of the children's responses. Kindness was identified in children's responses in reference to both themselves and others. Under the *VIA Classification of Character Strengths* kindness stems from the virtue "humanity." Kindness in this sense refers to "doing favors and good deeds for others; helping them; taking care of them" . Children predominantly talked about kindness in reference to being nice, helpful and caring. Nice is a synonym to the word kind that begins to become a part of a child's vocabulary from the age of two years . In Rotenberg's study investigating character constancy in 62 children from kindergarten to grade three, kindness was the most frequent trait given in a trait reference task, where children were asked to "try

and describe you to me – try and tell me what you are like.” Kindness is a commonly displayed behaviour in younger children. Children as young as two years have been found to display “kind” behaviours, such as; helping, sharing and even comforting others . Park and Peterson suggest kindness may be the one of the first character strengths to develop in children. The finding that the children in this study emphasised the character strengths of kindness therefore fits in with the literature, further suggesting the methodology used was developmentally appropriate.

Self-Regulation

Self-regulation was identified in eight of the children’s responses. Self-regulation was predominantly recognised in response to questions which referred to others, as opposed to being recognised in the children themselves. Self-Regulation comes under the *VIA Classification of Character Strengths* virtue of temperance. Self-regulation refers to “regulating what one feels and does; being disciplined; controlling one’s appetites and emotions” (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). For the purposes of this study, patience and responsibility were considered separate character strengths from self-regulation. Children talked about self-regulation, particularly in response to questions from the First Day of School Photo. Typically self-regulation was referred to in responses where children mentioned being good, following rules and showing restraint. According to Baumeister and Exline self-control (a synonym of self-regulation) is a key psychological strength which sets apart humans from all other beings. The ability to ignore ones preferences and impulses is integral to this. The children’s emphasis on rules is again consistent with research by Dockett and Perry who investigated what children feel to be important when starting school. They found that the majority of children in their study mentioned school rules and routines and the consequences for breaking these. Within the school context

children must learn various academic self-regulatory skills such as, time management, listening skills and concentration, strategies for remembering new information, organisational skills, motivation and goal setting . Given the increased emphasis on following rules when a child first starts school, it is to be expected that children themselves when talking about the best things about themselves and others will stress the importance of following rules and behaving appropriately, and therefore, the character strength of self-regulation.

Developmental Considerations

The children in this study were found to fit into three different stages/levels in terms of the way in which they talked about character strengths. These differences were unrelated to the chronological age of the child, as some of the youngest children in the study were able to talk about their character strengths in advanced ways comparative to the other study children.

It is widely recognised that there are large developmental changes in children between the ages of five and seven, commonly known as the five to seven year shift. During these two years it is said children undergo significant changes in many areas of development such as neurological, cognitive and socio-emotional domains . It may be that the differences in the way in which children talked about character strengths is linked to their development. The findings of this study will now be discussed in reference to child development.

The development of a “sense of self”

The literature on the development of self-concept purports that children aged between four and seven years tend to describe themselves in terms of observable actions and skills in positive and sometimes exaggerated ways and their self-descriptions are void of any trait terms . The findings from this study however, are not altogether consistent with this literature. Four children when asked “what is the best thing about you” gave self-descriptions solely based around their physical abilities and skills such as being good at playing on the monkey bars in the school playground or writing. Thirteen children however, gave self-descriptions to this question that included at least one reference to internal attributes and character strengths. Furthermore, some of the children included trait terms in their self-descriptions, without any prompting or prior exposure to the terms in interviews. Butler helps to explain such results by saying young children may have been underestimated when it comes to their ability to give accurate self-evaluations. Butler states that when observing children in natural settings, children do not tend to overestimate their abilities and do tasks that are too difficult for them. In addition, children tend to do better on assessments where tasks and settings are familiar as opposed to novel and when less emphasis is placed on memory and attention. This view is shared by Marsh and colleagues who state that if children’s self-perceptions are assessed in developmentally appropriate ways children may be able to give accurate self-evaluations.

The children’s ability to talk about their internal attributes and character strengths may in part be due to the way in which strategies for this study were sequenced. Interviews started familiarly and impersonally with the use of a story and gradually became more directly relevant to children and less structured and familiar ending with the Semi-Structured Interviews direct questioning strategy. This is similar to what Marsh and colleagues found in their study investigating self-concept in five to eight year olds using the *Self Description Questionnaire (SDQ)*. In their study, items towards the end of the

questionnaire were found to be more effective than earlier items. It may be that if children are gradually exposed to topics and encouraged to talk about internal characteristics such as character strengths, that they are able to give accounts of their self-perceptions that they otherwise might not have been able to do.

Cognitive Development

Children's responses to questions may be understood in terms of cognitive development. Evident in children's responses was an emphasis on the character strength of self-regulation, and the importance of following rules and engaging in good behaviour. This is consistent with Piaget and Kohlberg's (1969) cognitive theories of moral development whereby children are characterised by rigid rule-following and avoidance of punishment. What is considered "right" or "wrong" according to Piaget is dependent on consequences. Children's responses reflected a primary focus on rules, and often emphasised the reason behind the rule following was to avoid going into the "step-book" that is, to avoid punishment. The children's moral development in this study reflects they are predominantly in this stage.

Also indicative of different stages of cognitive development was children's ability to infer thoughts in several of the strategies. It was evident that children were able to make inferences at differing levels of ability. Some children were able to put themselves directly in the shoes of characters and infer their thoughts in the first person. Other children were able to infer thoughts, however, did so in the third person. Conversely other children struggled with making inferences as to character's thoughts and either did so inappropriately or could not answer inference-based questions. The differing abilities of the children to answer inference-based questions may be another indicator of differences in cognitive development.

Social and Emotional Development

As suggested by Gibbs and Schnell to gain a complete picture of moral development it is important to not only investigate cognitive domains but to also consider areas of social and emotional development. Differences in the way the children talked about character strengths could also be explained by differences in experience. Some children are exposed to many different people and environments. It may be that children who are exposed to a wide variety of contexts and people develop a greater understanding of themselves and others. It is also plausible that children who have their strengths in interpersonal domains such as affiliation and kindness are more “in tune” with others and themselves and therefore develop an understanding of their own and others character strengths before children who have their strengths in other areas. The social domain may also play a large role in the development of character strengths; it is this social domain that will now be discussed in more depth.

Social nature of character strengths

The children’s responses to questions raises the issue as to what extent it can be speculated that children’s responses reflect self-perceptions of character strengths and not socially sanctioned values or statements of learnt rules of behaviour.

Societal Influences

Children’s responses particularly to the Puppet Scenario strategy reflect an element of social desirability. Children’s responses indicated that they may have been repeating understandings of socially sanctioned values and therefore not revealing character strengths. This rationale could arguably also be applied to the other strategies, that is, that

children were merely repeating social norms and values and not revealing their perceptions of character strengths. Character by its very definition is socially desirable as virtues and character strengths are reflections of what a society values . It is likely that “good character” is learnt through social processes whereby a child’s environment models appropriate behaviours and emphasises certain values which become internalised, shaping a child’s values and ideas of societal rules and regulations, which in turn, influence behaviour . Separating societal influences therefore is not possible as character strengths are socially desirable . The presence of societal influences is not unique to this study. In order to reduce socially desirable responding Measelle and colleagues used forced-choice, yes or no, questions with children aged four-and-a-half to seven-and-a-half years of age. Whilst this limits socially desirable responding in some ways, it still creates the issue that children of that age know what the more socially desirable choice is and might pick this option anyway. Park and Peterson recognised the threat of social desirability when studying character strengths by self-report and suggest additional strategies to self-report such as parent/teacher report and direct observation are needed.

Having an understanding of social norms and values does not necessarily mean that the children in the study possess certain character strengths. That is, just because the children may be cognitively aware of morals and societal rules and norms does not necessarily mean that they will display certain character strengths themselves. This may be the case in this study, whereby children reflected character strengths in their responses due to a fundamental understanding of societal norms, and not due to perceptions that they possess them.

Children’s responses as previously discussed emphasised self-regulation, particularly following the rules. It could also be argued that children’s responses therefore, were not indicative of the character strength of self-regulation rather of children’s

understandings of the rules and the need to follow them. There is an early emphasis in schools on following instructions, learning and abiding by the rules and developing academic skills. It is likely that children especially when they first start school become pre-occupied with rules and the following of them. This fits with the theories of cognitive moral development which state children at five-and-a half years of age are at the stage where thinking is black and white, and rules must be followed in order to avoid punishment. Given this, it may be that self-regulation is a character strength the children in the study value and their responses indicative of rule following are the beginnings of internalising the following of rules into a set of values.

Another way in which social influences were apparent was in some children's answers about the best things about themselves and others. For example, those children who responded in such a way as to say that they were "a good boy" or "good at listening" were likely repeating praise they had received for positive behaviour within the classroom or at home. It could be argued because of this, that such children were not describing their own perceptions of the best things about themselves but instead reflecting what they believe others think are the best things about them. On the other hand however, given the social nature of strengths, and the fact that character strengths are only considered to be so because they are valued by others and society at large, these responses could also be considered valid as they are still reflecting what children think might be the best things about themselves. It may be that positive praise such as this becomes internalised and, is one way in which children begin to develop their sense of self.

Good character goes hand in hand with societal norms and values, and therefore socially desirable responding can never truly be eliminated when researching character strengths. The question as to whether children are merely revealing an understanding of socially valued character strengths in their responses or are actually reflecting children's

self-perceptions is unknown. It is likely that there are elements of both of these types of responses in children's answers, and that at this age children may be on the cusp of developing a pronounced sense of self and as such may be internalising societal values, rules and regulations and positive praise they have received to develop their self-concept. In order to better distinguish between "real" character strengths the children actually possess, observations of children's behaviour would need to be made in a series of situations, this would help to determine whether children are merely revealing an understanding of character strengths and social morals and values or whether these are character strengths they do possess and display.

Character Strengths versus states

Children's responses in this study might also be interpreted to be indicative of states and emotions rather than strengths of character. For example, some children identified that they would be nice to the new entrant child, or play with him/her. This might not necessarily indicate strength of character. Just as there is a difference between being sad and being depressed for example, there is also a difference between being kind to someone and being a kind person. It may be that the children in the study identified that they would be nice to another child starting school and/or play with them in this context, however, it does not necessarily follow that the child possesses the character strength of kindness or affiliation. In order to determine if a child possesses certain character strengths, a range of behaviours and contexts again needs to be explored, otherwise behaviours might only be indicative of themselves rather than as a broader indication of strength of character (Park & Peterson, 2003).

Study Limitations and strengths

The main limitation to this study is its exploratory nature. The limited prior research and existing strategies for obtaining young children's self-reported character strengths has meant that measures have had to be created. The strategies created for this study, whilst initially pilot-tested are still in the early stages of development, and therefore require further refinement and testing in order to maximise their effectiveness.

My own inexperience at conducting qualitative interviews also meant the information gathered was potentially not as rich as it might otherwise have been. Interviews had set questions but were also designed to be flexible so that children's responses could be followed-up and discussions about character strengths drawn out. Due to my own inexperience with this type of interview, it was felt that interviews were too focussed on the set questions and not children's responses. Follow-up questions where flexibility was to be key, were not efficiently done as questions asked could have better followed children's individual responses. Despite this, my experience with children and the rapport created with them meant that children felt comfortable talking with me, enjoyed participating in the interviews and ultimately rich information on their perceptions of character strengths was still obtained.

The methodology as a whole still needs to be refined and further developed to ensure questions asked and strategies carried out with children are effective at promoting discussion about character strengths. Some children were found to be disinterested or unfocussed during interviews at times. This could be because of other events in their lives or because the methodology used was not appropriate for them. On the other hand, the majority of children were enthusiastic and talkative during interviews which may be due to the strategies used, therefore, the methodology might not only be a limitation of this study, but also a strength.

Creating set questions aimed at identifying the “best thing” about characters in each of the measures prior to the interview may also result in more children talking about character strengths as these were the types of questions that appeared to prompt children to talk about character strengths in more direct ways.

Due to the exploratory nature of this study, reliability and validity were not specifically assessed. However, the use of methodological triangulation (use of multiple methods to study a problem) and detailed description (use of quotes, and descriptions to provide evidence for interpretations) help to provide some credibility to this research. Despite this, it is still uncertain whether the measures used are good indicators of character strengths. Further research is needed to determine whether the measures that have been created are accurately assessing character strengths. Future research should also utilise several persons to code data to assess reliability.

This research due to its exploratory nature also utilised a small un-representative sample of only 17 children. The small sample size means results need to be interpreted with caution as it is uncertain whether this study would have yielded the same results had more children been interviewed. Participants were also from a high decile school. Children from such schools tend to have better access to resources, have well educated parents and come from backgrounds with a high socio-economic status . These combined protective factors may help to facilitate the development and emergence of character strengths in children, and therefore, it is uncertain whether other children from different backgrounds would express their self-perceived character strengths in the same way as the children in this study. The type of sample utilised combined with the exploratory nature of this research mean results should be interpreted with caution and not generalised to other populations. Once measures have been refined and perfected, future research should be conducted with a representative sample so that results will be more meaningful.

Another limitation to this current study is the way in which data was coded. For the most part it was necessary to interpret character strengths from children's responses resulting in potentially subjective coding. Whilst the *VIA Classification of Character Strengths* was utilised and operational definitions of non *VIA Classification of Character Strengths* terms created, an element of interpretation was still present. In order to avoid this, future research should utilise several coders, to determine reliability of coding. It may also be useful for an adaptation of the *VIA Classifications of Character Strengths* to be created so that the categories and definitions better represent the ways in which character strengths are displayed by children. Such a classification system would assist more reliable and objective data coding.

Despite these limitations, this thesis has explored a relatively new area in positive psychology. A developmentally appropriate methodology for accessing children's perceptions has been created. The majority of the children enjoyed participating in interviews and were talkative meaning some initial meaningful findings have been obtained. This study is a good starting point for future research.

Conclusions

This study has been a useful initial exploration into five-and-a-half to six-year-old children's self-perceived character strengths. The creation and sequencing of four strategies were helpful for assisting children to talk about character strengths, and were useful tools for obtaining children's voices. Children in the study were able to talk about the character strengths of themselves and others, particularly mentioning kindness, self-regulation and affiliation. The difficulty of separating children's actual perceptions of strengths to their beliefs and understanding of social sanctioned norms and values was evident, and may indicate children are at a point in their development where they are internalising positive

praise and rules and are becoming aware of social values. This study has created a possible methodology for obtaining children's voices in research, and has uncovered that young children can when asked in developmentally appropriate ways give their self-perceptions of the character strengths of themselves and others. The study of positive psychology and character strengths is increasingly valid and may be one way in which positive attributes and outcomes can be fostered and promoted ultimately leading to positive wellbeing and life satisfaction

References

Appendices

1. *Values in Action (VIA) Classification of Character Strengths*
2. Pilot Study Interview Protocol
3. Main Study Interview Protocol
4. Copy of University of Canterbury Human Ethics Approval Letter
5. Copy of Upper South Health Resource Council Ethics Approval Letter
6. School Information Letter
7. Parent Information Letter
8. Consent Form
9. Teacher Questionnaire
10. Recording Form
11. Operational Definitions of character strengths not recognised in the *Values in Action Classification of Character Strengths*
12. Wylie's Transcript
13. Phoebe's Transcript
14. Jake's Transcript
15. Ingrid's' Transcript
16. Charlie's Transcript
17. Emily's Transcript
18. Jimmy's Transcript
19. Pippa's Transcript
20. Imogen's Transcript
21. Winston's Transcript
22. Gemma's Transcript
23. Jane's Transcript

24. Sarah's Transcript
25. Timothy's Transcript
26. Megan's Transcript
27. Joshua's Transcript
28. Fergus' Transcript

Appendix 1

Values in Action Classification of Character Strengths

1. **Wisdom and Knowledge** – cognitive strengths that entail the acquisition and use of knowledge
 - Creativity [originality, ingenuity]: Thinking of novel and productive ways to conceptualize and do things; includes artistic achievement but is not limited to it
 - Curiosity [interest, novelty-seeking, openness to experience]: Taking an interest in ongoing experience for its own sake; finding subjects and topics fascinating; exploring and discovering
 - Open-mindedness [judgment, critical thinking]: Thinking things through and examining them from all sides; not jumping to conclusions; being able to change one's mind in light of evidence; weighing all evidence fairly
 - Love of learning: Mastering new skills, topics, and bodies of knowledge, whether on one's own or formally; obviously related to the strength of curiosity but goes beyond it to describe the tendency to add systematically to what one knows
 - Perspective [wisdom]: Being able to provide wise counsel to others; having ways of looking at the world that make sense to oneself and to other people
2. **Courage** – emotional strengths that involve the exercise of will to accomplish goals in the face of opposition, external or internal
 - Bravery [valor]: Not shrinking from threat, challenge, difficulty, or pain; speaking up for what is right even if there is opposition; acting on convictions even if unpopular; includes physical bravery but is not limited to it
 - Persistence [perseverance, industriousness]: Finishing what one starts; persisting in a course of action in spite of obstacles; “getting it out the door”; taking pleasure in completing tasks
 - Integrity [authenticity, honesty]: Speaking the truth but more broadly presenting oneself in a genuine way and acting in a sincere way; being without pretense; taking responsibility for one's feelings and actions
 - Vitality [zest, enthusiasm, vigor, energy]: Approaching life with excitement and energy; not doing things halfway or halfheartedly; living life as an adventure; feeling alive and activated
3. **Humanity** - interpersonal strengths that involve tending and befriending others
 - Love: Valuing close relations with others, in particular those in which sharing and caring are reciprocated; being close to people
 - Kindness [generosity, nurturance, care, compassion, altruistic love, "niceness"]: Doing favors and good deeds for others; helping them; taking care of them
 - Social intelligence [emotional intelligence, personal intelligence]: Being aware of the motives and feelings of other people and oneself; knowing what to do to fit into different social situations; knowing what makes other people tick
4. **Justice** - civic strengths that underlie healthy community life
 - Citizenship [social responsibility, loyalty, teamwork]: Working well as a member of a group or team; being loyal to the group; doing one's share
 - Fairness: Treating all people the same according to notions of fairness and justice; not letting personal feelings bias decisions about others; giving everyone a fair chance.

- Leadership: Encouraging a group of which one is a member to get things done and at the time maintain time good relations within the group; organizing group activities and seeing that they happen.
- 5. **Temperance** – strengths that protect against excess
 - Forgiveness and mercy: Forgiving those who have done wrong; accepting the shortcomings of others; giving people a second chance; not being vengeful
 - Humility/Modesty: Letting one's accomplishments speak for themselves; not regarding oneself as more special than one is
 - Prudence: Being careful about one's choices; not taking undue risks; not saying or doing things that might later be regretted
 - Self-regulation [self-control]: Regulating what one feels and does; being disciplined; controlling one's appetites and emotions
- 6. **Transcendence** - strengths that forge connections to the larger universe and provide meaning
 - Appreciation of beauty and excellence [awe, wonder, elevation]: Noticing and appreciating beauty, excellence, and/or skilled performance in various domains of life, from nature to art to mathematics to science to everyday experience
 - Gratitude: Being aware of and thankful for the good things that happen; taking time to express thanks
 - Hope [optimism, future-mindedness, future orientation]: Expecting the best in the future and working to achieve it; believing that a good future is something that can be brought about
 - Humor [playfulness]: Liking to laugh and tease; bringing smiles to other people; seeing the light side; making (not necessarily telling) jokes
 - Spirituality [religiousness, faith, purpose]: Having coherent beliefs about the higher purpose and meaning of the universe; knowing where one fits within the larger scheme; having beliefs about the meaning of life that shape conduct and provide comfort

(Peterson and Seligman, 2004)

Appendix 2

Pilot Study Interview Protocol

Interviews

Introduction

The children will be interviewed individually, at the back of their classroom, the library, or another place familiar to them within the school. The interviewer will begin with an explanation as follows:

“My name is Beth, and I am here because I want to know what big five-year-olds like you think about! Thank you so much for helping me.”

Interviewing Procedure

“We are going to do some fun activities together, and I am going to ask you a few questions. You don’t have to answer any questions if you don’t want to, and you can go back to class at anytime as well. So that I can remember what you have said I am going to write down what you say on these bits of paper” (show children) “If you want to know what I have written down, just ask me and I will read it out to you”

1. Story Reading

The first activity will be to read children a four-page story about “Roy the Responsible Rabbit”. The story is about Roy who plants some seeds and has to look after and wait for them to grow into carrots. Roy displays various character strengths in this story such as: kindness, perseverance, trustworthiness, patience, helpfulness and responsibility. Once the story has been read, children will be asked a series of open-ended questions using the story as a context for their answer. This activity is scheduled as the first as it is very familiar to children as many school activities revolve around listening to, and answering questions about stories.

“The first thing we are going to do together is read a story. This is a story about Roy the rabbit, who plants some seeds that grow into carrots.”

(Read Story)

“What did Roy do in this story that you liked?”

Examples of possible follow-up questions:

“What is it about _____ that you liked?”

“Why did you like that about Roy?”

If child says they did not like anything about Roy ask “What could Roy have done that you would have liked?”

“What are the good things about Roy?”

2. Toy Scenario

Children will be shown a scenario using two teddy bears with non gender-specific names. One of the bears will act out borrowing the other teddy's favourite pencil without asking. The other bear will then want to use their pencil but be unable to find it. The child will then be asked a series of questions about this scenario.

"I also have these two teddy bears to show you, this one is called Miggy Bear, and this is Yoji Bear"

"Miggy bear has borrowed Yoji bear's favourite pencil without asking".

(Show Miggy bear taking pencil and put next to Miggy out of sight of Yoji)

"Yogi Bear wants to practice some writing but can't find a pencil anywhere!"

(Show Yoji Bear looking for the pencil)

"Miggy Bear notices Yoji Bear looking for the pencil, what is Miggy Bear going to do?"

(Give child Miggy Bear to act out what Miggy Bear is going to do)

Examples of possible follow-up questions:

"Why is Miggy Bear going to _____"

"What else could Miggy Bear have done?"

"What is the best thing about Miggy Bear?"

3. Starting School Picture

The third activity with children will involve giving children a photo to look at (see Figure 1). The photo shows a group of young school children. Children will be asked some questions which will indirectly be based on this picture.

"I have this photo of some children who are five and are about to start their first day of school to show you

(give children picture to hold)

Question 1

"What would you tell these children about starting school?"

Question 2

"What do these children need to know?"

Examples of possible follow-up questions:

"What do these children need to know about getting along with other children in the playground?"

"Why is that important for the children to know?"

"What things can you do to get along with other children?"

"What are the best things you would tell these children about the other children at school?"

4. Interview

Finally, children will be asked some questions out-right without the use of props or visual aids.

“This time I am just going to ask you some questions.... my first one is what are the best things about you?”

Possible follow-up questions:

“What makes that a good thing?”

“What are the best things you do for someone else?”

“What are some other things you can think of?”

Appendix 3

Main Study Interview Protocol

Interviews

1. Introduction

The children will be interviewed individually, at the back of their classroom, the library, or another place familiar to them within the school. The interviewer will begin with an explanation as follows:

“My name is Beth, and I am here because I want to know what big five-year-olds like you think about! Thank you so much for helping me.”

2. *Interviewing Procedure*

Children will be told that they are going to do some activities with the interviewer if they would like to. Children will be informed that these activities are voluntary and that they can leave at any time.

“Now we are going to do some fun activities together, and I am going to ask you a few questions. You don’t have to answer any questions if you don’t want to, and you can go back to class at anytime as well. So that I can remember what you have said I am going to write down what you say on these bits of paper” (show children) “If you want to know what I have written down, just ask me and I will read it out to you”

Story Reading

“The first thing we are going to do together is read a story. This is a story about Roy the rabbit, who plants some seeds that grow into carrots.”

After this brief introduction children will be read the story. Following the completion of the story several questions will be asked followed by some follow-up questions, which will vary depending on the answers children give to the initial questions.

Question 1:

“Tell me what happened in this story?”

Rationale for Question:

This question has been added after the completion of the pilot study, this is because it allows children to “retell” the events of the story in their own words thereby giving the researcher an impression of each child’s level of comprehension and therefore a better understanding of the answers they give.

Question 2:

(Turn to appropriate page see figure 1.)

“What was Roy thinking in his head when his carrots weren’t ready to pick?

(Turn to appropriate page in book and put speech bubble on blank page opposite illustration)

Rationale for Question:

This question was added after the pilot study to encourage children to think about the internal traits of Roy rather than just his actions. The speech bubble is an aid to help children understand that they are being asked about what Roy is thinking.

Figure 1:



Question 3:

What did Roy do?

Rationale for Question:

This question has also been added from the pilot study. It is a comprehension based question in that it asks children about what Roy did in the story; however, it serves a secondary and more important purpose as it asks children what Roy did when his carrots were not ready to pick. It is aimed at trying to identify whether children can recognise that Roy did not give up and kept waiting for the carrots to grow (showed perseverance and patience), as portrayed in the story.

Question 4:

What do you think Roy really wanted to do?

Rationale for Question:

This question follows on from the previous one and is aimed at identifying whether children are able to understand that what people do and what they want to do can sometimes be different. Namely can children identify that what Roy probably wanted to do (give up / do something else) was the opposite of what he did do (persevere).

Question 5:

(Turn to appropriate page see figure 2.)

“What was Roy thinking in his head when he saw the orange tops of the carrots?”

(Turn to appropriate page in book and write child's answer in a speech bubble)

Rationale for Question:

This question has again been developed from the pilot study and asks children about Roy's internal traits rather than his actions. It endeavours to identify whether children can understand the sense of achievement Roy feels when his carrots grow and are ready to pick. So aims to find out whether the children in the study understand that by doing the “right” thing and persevering positive outcomes are more likely.

Figure 2.



Examples of possible follow-up questions:

1. What are the best words to say what sort of rabbit Roy is?

Rationale:

This story is about the good qualities Roy displays to grow his carrots. This question is aimed at identifying whether children are able to recognise the strengths of Roy, and if they can whether these are the same or different to the qualities the story is trying to convey.

2. What could Roy have done differently?

Rationale:

Can children think of some other strengths that Roy could have displayed?

3. Why would that have been better?

Rationale:

By following up with this question it enables children to explain their response to the previous question and may reveal what children at this age feel are important and value.

Toy Scenario

“I also have these two puppets to show you, this is Quackers, and this is Bunnykins”

(Show child each puppet as they are introduced)

“Can you remember their names? What are they?”

Rationale:

Asking children if they can remember the puppets names is important as it makes certain the child can distinguish between the two puppets and thus be able to follow the scenario. If the child cannot remember the names, they can then be repeated and reintroduced to ensure that the child will be able to follow what is to come.

“This is Quacker’s / Bunnykins favourite pencil”

(Show Quackers / Bunnykins with the pencil, then show Quackers / Bunnykins putting the pencil into a pencil case – Quackers / Bunnykins then disappears)

“Quackers / Bunnykins wants to do some writing but doesn’t have a pencil

(Show Quackers / Bunnykins with a blank piece of paper and then looking in Quackers / Bunnykins pencil case. Next show Quackers/Bunnykins taking the pencil and putting it into their own pencil case)

Question 1:

What just happened?

Rationale:

This question is comprehension based and is used to inform the researcher as to what children have understood about the scenario, this is so the answers children give to the following questions can be better understood.

Question 2:

What is Quackers / Bunnykins thinking in his head?

Rationale:

By asking children what the character is thinking in their head, children are forced to focus on internal attributes rather than actions, their answer to this question helps inform the researcher as to what the child understands about what a person may think after they have done something they should not have.

Continue with scenario

“Now Quackers / Bunnykins wants to practice some writing”

(Show Quackers / Bunnykins coming back and then looking first in his pencil case and then all around for the favourite pencil)

Question 4:

What should Quackers / Bunnykins do?

Rationale:

This question is asking about what the “right” action for the puppet to take is. It is aimed at identifying whether children know the socially acceptable action would be and therefore understand societal rules. This question also examines children’s understanding of the “moral strengths”

Question 5:

What does Quackers / Bunnykins want to do?

Rationale:

This follow-up question again asks children if they can identify the difference between doing what is “right” and fulfilling ones desires. Consequently this question aims to eliminate socially desirable responding and enable children to answer this question based on what they themselves think/might themselves want to do.

(Regardless of what child says show Quackers / Bunnykins giving back the pencil to Quackers / Bunnykins)

Question 6:

What is Quackers / Bunnykins thinking now?

Rationale:

This question is to determine children’s perspectives on how they think a person feels when they do the “right” thing. That is, do children respond with answers that reflect that the puppet feels good about giving the pencil back or do they respond negatively to this action?

Question 7:

Why did Quackers / Bunnykins give the pencil back?

Rationale:

This is just another way to ask the child about their understanding of moral strengths. Do children know the reason/rationale behind social norms?

Examples of possible follow-up questions:

1. What else could Quackers / Bunnykins have done?

Rationale:

Can children identify what would have been the “right” action for the puppet to take, instead of stealing the pencil? This question helps to further identify children’s understanding of socially acceptable behaviours.

2. What is the best thing about Quackers / Bunnykins giving back the pencil?

Rationale:

This question aims to identify whether children can explain the reason/s behind doing the “right” thing.

3. What is the best thing about Quackers / Bunnykins?

This question is designed to discover whether children are able to recognise the strengths displayed by the characters in the scenario

Starting School Picture

The third activity will involve giving children a photo to look at (see Figure 3). There will be two photos, one showing a boy and the other a girl, with slightly apprehensive looks on their faces. The gender of the child being assessed will determine which photo is shown (boys will be shown the photo of the boy and girls the photo of the girl). Children will be asked some questions which will be indirectly based on the photo they are shown.

“I have this photo to show you of a girl/boy who has just turned 5 and is starting his/her first day of school”

(Put photo in front of the child)

Question 1:

“What would you tell this boy/girl about starting school?”

Rationale:

This question is derived from Donelan and McCall and asks children about what they think children need to know when they first start school. In particular the “strengths” they might need in order to succeed within the school setting.

Question 2:

“What does he/she need to know?”

Rationale:

This question aims to identify what children feel are the most important aspects of starting school, and what they feel is the most important thing to tell someone else about. It is

hoped that by this time in the interviews children will be cued to respond based on internal attributes rather than external actions/objects.

Question 3:

What do you think he/she is thinking on the inside?

(Put speech bubble next to photo)

Rationale:

This question asks about the internal thoughts/feelings associated with starting school and has been created to identify to facilitate children in projecting their own memories about starting school into their answers.

These three structured questions set up the context for which to ask children about socially based strengths. That is the strengths they themselves, or others may need to get along with others and be happy at school. The school context has been used as this is the one children are being interviewed in, as well as being an important and significant part of a child's life and a major source of social interactions.

Examples of possible follow-up questions:

1. What would you tell him/her about getting along with others in the playground?

Rationale:

This question is being asked to determine whether children are able to identify some of the "social strengths" needed to get along with others.

2. What would you tell him/her about the other children at school?

Rationale:

This question is trying to reveal whether children are able to recognise the strengths of others, and if they can what they say about them.

3. What things can you do to get along with these children?

Rationale:

What children understand about the "social strength" and socially acceptable behaviours is again being assessed in this potential follow up question.

Figure 3.

Photos used for Main Study



Rationale:

The photo used in the pilot study was of a group of happy looking children. The change to two gender specific photos of children with slightly apprehensive looks on their faces, is so children are able to relate better to the photo, and therefore it is hoped give answers to

questions which reflect their own thoughts and feelings about starting school rather than socially desirable answers.

Interview

Finally, children will be asked some questions out-right without the use of props or visual aids.

“This time I am just going to ask you some questions.... my first one is what is the best thing about you?”

Rationale:

This question is really what the study is aiming to assess, and does so in a direct manner. It is asked to identify whether children are able to answer this question by giving reflective answers about inner features, or whether they answer using physical, observable attributes. In addition, the question allows the researcher to identify (if children can answer the question) what kinds of things children say are their best qualities.

Possible follow-up questions:

1. What are the best things about the other children in your class?

Rationale:

This question is another way of asking children without the use of props to identify the strengths of others. It is being asked in order to firstly determine whether children can identify positive internal attributes of others when asked this question and secondly if they can, to identify what it is they say.

2. What are some other things you can think of?

Rationale:

This is just a question aimed to prompt children to give more information to the previous question.

3. What are the best words to describe what sort of person you are?

Rationale:

This is another, more direct way, of asking children about their strengths, it uses more sophisticated language and has been adapted from Yuill and Pearson .

Appendix 4

University of Canterbury Human Ethics Approval Letter

HEC Ref: 2006/99

7 August 2008

Beth Ferguson
Education
UNIVERSITY OF CANTERBURY

Dear Beth

The Human Ethics Committee advises that your research proposal “Young Children’s Perceptions of Character Strengths” has been considered and approved.

Yours sincerely

Dr Alison Loveridge
Chair, Human Ethics Committee

Appendix 5

Upper South Health Resource Council Approval Letter

18 September 2006

Kathleen Liberty
School of Education
University of Canterbury
Private Bag 4800
Christchurch

Dear Kathleen Liberty

Ethics Ref: CTB/04/11/211

Academic Achievement and Behaviour in New Entrant Children with Asthma

Thank you for your facsimile letter dated 15 September 2006 regarding summer studentship projects for the above study. This has been reviewed by the Chairperson of the Upper South A Regional Ethics Committee and determined not to require approval by a Regional Health & Disabilities Ethics Committee.

This reasoning is based upon the information from the main study that is being used, is not health information and the fact that the information being used, and the nature of the information, is clearly explained to prospective participants. However, the initial letter to participants will need to come from either yourself or one of your research team (as this is the only contact consented to by participants from the main study) and no one else should have access to their contact details. Therefore, it is suggested that you introduce Beth Ferguson within the initial letter.

Please do not hesitate to contact me should you require anything further.

Yours sincerely

Jo Hamlyn
Administrator
Upper South A Regional Ethics Committee

Appendix 6

School Information Letter

University of Canterbury
School of Education

10 October 2006

Dear [Name of Principal] and Teachers in the Children's Learning Study,

My Name is Beth Ferguson, and I am currently studying towards my Masters Degree at the University of Canterbury. As part of the requirements I am completing a research thesis.

As part of my research and with your permission I would like to:

1. Conduct individual interviews at your school with a total of twenty children in the Children's Learning Study. Interviews will take no longer than ten minutes per child.
2. Conduct interviews in the child's classroom where they are comfortable. This can take place whilst other activities are going on in the room if suitable to the teacher, or perhaps just before or just after school, or at another time arranged with the class teacher.
3. Interviews are positive and will include these activities: reading a story together, acting out a scenario with toys, looking at a picture of children starting their first day of school, and answering questions about the best things about themselves.
4. Teachers will also be asked to fill out the attached questionnaire for each child. This should take two-three minutes per child.

Parents will be well informed about this study and what is involved for them and their child, and give written permission for their child to be a part of this study.

My research is focussed on what children perceive to be the good qualities of themselves and others, and as such interviews will ask children open-ended questions about what they think are the good characteristics/qualities of themselves and others.

If you have any questions or concerns about this study then please do not hesitate to get in touch with either myself or my supervisor, Dr. Kathleen Liberty at the contact numbers listed below. We will be happy to answer any questions or discuss any concerns you may have about this project.

Yours sincerely,

Beth Ferguson
364-2987 ext 8287
brf21@student.canterbury.ac.nz

Dr. Kathleen Liberty
364-2987 ext 6545 or
kathleen.liberty@canterbury.ac.nz

Appendix 7

Parent Information Letter

University of Canterbury
School of Education

Dear parent/guardian,

You and your child are invited to participate in a study about what young children recognise as good qualities in themselves and others. This study is being carried out as a requirement for the Masters Degree in Education and is being conducted in conjunction with the Children's Learning Study you and your child are already a part of.

Involvement in this study would require:

1. Your child to answer four questions about what they think are their own and others good qualities. Questions will be based around the following activities: a) reading a story about a rabbit who shows various good qualities b) a scenario that will be acted out by two puppets c) a picture of school children and d) a question without any props or aids.

With your permission it is hoped that these questions can be asked at your child's school during school hours at a time that is least intrusive; however, if you would prefer for questions to be asked with you present, other arrangements can be made. It is estimated that this will take no longer than fifteen minutes.

2. Your child's teacher will complete three questions about your child's current skills for communicating about events. This is to help me better understand the answers your child gives.
3. The information that has been collected for the Children's Learning Study, namely the question "what are your child's strengths?" "Describe their best characteristics" will be used with your permission in this study also.

If you and your child do decide to participate, all information will be kept strictly confidential, and stored in locked cabinets, and computers with passwords. You will have the right to withdraw from participating in this study at any time, including the withdrawal of any information already provided.

There are no known risks to you or your child in participating in this study. It is hoped that children will find this a fun and interesting exercise.

The results of the project may be published, but you may be assured of the complete confidentiality of data gathered in this investigation: the identity of you and your child will not be published without your consent. To ensure anonymity, you and your child will be given a code name so you will not be able to be identified by any persons in any way.

A summary of this study will be available in late March 2007 if you wish to receive a copy.

If you would like any further information about this study please do not hesitate to contact either myself on 364-2987 extension 8287 or brf21@student.canterbury.ac.nz or my supervisor for this study, Dr. Kathleen Liberty on 364-6545 or kathleen.liberty@canterbury.ac.nz, we will be pleased to discuss any concerns or answer any questions you may have about participating in this project.

Yours sincerely,

Beth Ferguson

Appendix 8

Consent Form

University of Canterbury
School of Education

CONSENT FORM Children's Perceived Character Strengths Study

I have read the information letter attached and give my permission for my son/daughter, to participate in this research.

I understand that all information given will be kept strictly confidential and our privacy will be protected.

I have explained this project to my child, and they understand that they will be interviewed and agree to participate

I give permission from my child's teacher to fill out a language questionnaire about my child.

I give permission for my child to be interviewed for this project during school hours

I understand that I may withdraw from participating from the project at any time, including the withdrawal of any information my child or I have provided.

Parent/Caregiver Name _____

Child's Name _____

Parent/Caregiver Signature _____

Date _____

Appendix 9

Teacher Questionnaire

University of Canterbury
School of Education

Children's Perceptions of Character Strengths Study Teacher Questionnaire

Dear Teacher,

Please answer the following questions about _____ language and communication skills. Write any additional information if applicable in the spaces provided

1. Can this child produce a sentence of five or more words? Yes / No

2. Can this child describe a sequence of events? Yes / No

3. Can this child give an explanation of events? Yes / No

Appendix 10

Recording Form

RECORDING FORM
Children's Perceived Character Strengths Study

Child Name _____

Date of Interview _____

Time of Interview _____

Setting of Interview:

Comments:

Strategy 1 - STORY

Questions

- 1: Tell me what happened in this story
- 2: What was Roy thinking in his head when his carrots weren't ready to pick?
- 3: What did Roy do?
- 4: What do you think he really wanted to do?
- 5: What was Roy thinking in his head when he saw the orange tops of the carrots?

Follow-Up Questions:

1. What are the best words to say what sort of rabbit Roy is?
2. What could Roy have done differently?
3. Why would that have been better?

Answers & Prompts/Questions Used

Comments / Notes:

Strategy 2 – PUPPET SCENARIO

Questions

1. What Just happened?
2. What is Quackers / Bunnykins thinking in his head?
3. What should Quackers / Bunnykins do?
4. What does Quackers / Bunnykins want to do?
5. What is Quackers / Bunnykins thinking now?
6. Why did Quackers / Bunnykins give the pencil back?

Follow-Up Questions

1. What else could Quackers / Bunnykins have done?
2. What is the best thing about Quackers / Bunnykins giving back the pencil?
3. What is the best thing about Quackers / Bunnykins?

Answer & Questions asked:

Comments / Notes:

Strategy 3 – FIRST DAY OF SCHOOL PHOTO

Questions:

1. What would you tell this girl/boy about starting school?
2. What does he/she need to know?
3. What do you think he/she is thinking on the inside?

Follow Up Questions:

1. What would you tell him/her about getting along with others in the playground?
2. What would you tell him/her about the other children at school?
3. What things can you do to get along with this boy/girl?

Answer & Prompts Used (in quotation marks):**Comments / Notes:**

Strategy 4: SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW

Question

1. What are the best things about you?

Follow up Questions

1. What are the best things about the other children in your class?
2. What are the best words to describe what sort of person you are?

Answer & Prompts Used (in quotation marks):**Comments / Notes:**

Appendix 11

Operational Definitions of character strengths not recognised in the *Values in Action Classification of Character Strengths*

Affiliation

The ability to make friends, interact effectively with others and the valuing of close relationships/friendships with others.

Independence

Self-reliance and a sense of autonomy

Patience

The ability to wait and/or endure waiting without becoming annoyed or upset.

Responsibility

Conscientiousness, dependability, completing chores/duties and looking after ones personal belongings as well as one's self.

Appendix 12

Wylie's Transcript

Strategy 1 – Roy the Rabbit Story

Question 1 - Tell me what happened in the story

“Roy was being really good and decided he would be responsible, but it was really hard, but he did it because he was good.”

Question 2 - What was Roy thinking in his head when his carrots weren't ready to pick?

“Thought they would never grow.”

Why did he think that?

“Because it takes such a long time.”

Question 3 - What did Roy do?

“He tried until he did it.”

Question 4 - What do you think Roy really wanted to do?

“He wanted to plant a quicker plant that could grow.”

Question 5 - What was Roy thinking in his head when he saw the orange tops of the carrots?

“He thought that every time he planted one they would really grow.”

Follow-up 2 - What could Roy have done differently?

“Could have planted a different plant that took fewer to grow.”

Strategy 2 – Puppet Scenario

Question 1 - What just happened?

“He didn't ask Crackers.”

Question 2 - What is Bunnykins thinking in his head?

“That he can just help himself.”

Question 3 - What should Bunnykins do?

“He is writing with Quackers favourite pencil, cheeky bunny.”

Question 4 - What does Bunnykins want to do?

“He could have asked. Asked Quackers if he's allowed to use it. He was being quite cheeky.”

Question 5 - What is Bunnykins thinking now?

“He was a bit naughty for stealing it.”

Question 6 - Why did Bunnykins give the pencil back?

“Because it was Crackers own pencil, and Bunnykins was naughty to take it because he wanted to do writings, so was cheeky and just took it.”

Strategy 3 – Starting School Photo

Question 1 - What would you tell this boy about starting school?

“That at [name of school] you have to be responsible like rabbit. He didn’t give up until he did it.”

Question 2 - What does he need to know?

“What class he’s going to be in.”

What else?

“Needs to know if he’s being a good boy. If he didn’t know he might get told off.”

Question 3 – What do you think he is thinking on the inside?

“He’ll be a good boy. Thinks he’s going to be good at writing.”

Anything else?

“He will be very nice to people.”

Strategy 4 – Semi-Structured Interview

Question 1 - What is the best thing about you?

“If someone gets hurt I’ll make sure they’re alright. Like today my friend was crying cos he didn’t bring his books back, so I gave him Flopsy, it’s my favourite friend, it’s not real though.”

Appendix 12

Phoebe's Transcript

Strategy 1 – Roy the Rabbit Story

Question 1 - Tell me what happened in the story

“Roy picked the carrots.”

Question 2 - What was Roy thinking in his head when his carrots weren't ready to pick?

“When will they come out?”

Question 3 - What did Roy do?

“Waited and waited.”

Question 4 - What do you think Roy really wanted to do?

“Pick them.”

Question 5 - What was Roy thinking in his head when he saw the orange tops of the carrots?

“It's time to pick them.”

How would he be feeling?

“Happy and excited.”

Follow-up 1 – What is the best thing about Roy?

“He had a bulge in his neck.”

Follow-up 2 - What could Roy have done differently?

“Waited and watered.”

Strategy 2 – Puppet Scenario

Question 1 - What just happened?

“It was Bunnykin's favourite pencil and Quackers took it.”

Question 2 - What is Quackers thinking in his head?

“He wants to write with it.”

Question 3 - What should Quackers do?

“Going to write now. Tell Bunnykins if he can use it.”

Question 4 - What does Quackers want to do?

“Write.”

Question 5 - What is Quackers thinking now?

“He gave it back.”

Question 6 - Why did Quackers give the pencil back?

“Because he was already writing with it.”

Follow-up 1 - What else could Quackers have done?

“Say Bunnykins can I please use it?”

Follow-up 2 - Why would that have been better?

“When you take things without asking it’s stealing.”

Strategy 3 – First Day of School Photo

Question 1 - What would you tell this girl about starting school?

“It’s fun.”

What else?

“You need to listen to your teacher.”

Why do you need to do that?

“Otherwise you get told off.”

Question 2 - What does she need to know?

“Half and counting.”

Question 3 - What do you think he/she is thinking on the inside?

“One plus one.”

What else do you think she’ll be thinking?

“The teachers will be nice, it will be fun.”

Follow-up 1- What would you tell her about getting along with others in the playground?

“Don’t know.”

Follow-up 2 - What would you tell her about the other children at school?

“If they get hurt you should hep them.”

Strategy 4 – Semi-Structured Interview

Question 1 - What is the best thing about you?

“I can do a trick on my scooter. I am nice to people.”

Follow-up 1 - What are the best things about the other children in your class?

“They are nice to me.”

Appendix 13

Jake's Transcript

Strategy 1 – Roy the Rabbit Story

Question 1 - Tell me what happened in the story

"Roy found a seed when he was going to school, and then he wanted to grow them, and they did, and they had fresh carrots for tea."

Question 2 - What was Roy thinking in his head when his carrots weren't ready to pick?

"The carrots might grow soon."

Question 3- What did Roy do?

"He wrote carrots."

Question 4 - What do you think Roy really wanted to do?

"He watered them and wanted them to grow into carrots."

Question 5 - What was Roy thinking in his head when he saw the orange tops of the carrots?

"To have them for tea."

Follow-up 1- What are the best things about Roy?

"He found the seeds and they grewed, and he had carrots for tea."

Follow-up 2 - What could Roy have done differently?

"Found a different kind of seed."

Strategy 2 – Puppet Scenario

Question 1 - What just happened?

"He might want to have that pencil. He might let him have it and pick a different pencil. Quackers shared the pencil."

Question 2 - What is Bunnykins thinking in his head?

"He might want to have it."

Question 3 - What should Bunnykins do?

"Put the pencil back in there."

Question 4 - What does Bunnykins want to do?

"He wants to draw."

Question 5 - What is Bunnykins thinking now?

"He still wants to draw but he needs to get a new pencil from here."

Question 6 - Why did Bunnykins give the pencil back?

"Because that was his favourite pencil."

Follow-up 1 - What else could Bunnykins have done?

“He could’ve just given it to him.”

Follow-up 2 - Why would that have been better?

“That he was being nice.”

Strategy 3 – First Day of School Photo

Question 1 - What would you tell this boy about starting school?

“It’s good that he’s going to start school because he’s going to practice lots of things.”

Anything else you would tell him?

“He needs to have a uniform.”

Question 2 - What does he need to know?

“Lots of words and letters.”

What else?

“He has to be good at school.”

Follow-up 1 - What would you tell him about getting along with others in the playground?

“He has to be nice to them.”

Why does he have to be nice to them?

“Because if he doesn’t play nice everyone will get grumpy with him.”

Follow-up 2 - What would you tell him about the other children at school?

“He needs to play really nicely.”

Follow-up 3 - What things can you do to get along with this boy?

“Be nice to him and play with him, if I join friends with him.”

Strategy 4 – Semi-Structured Interview

Question 1 - What is the best thing about you?

“When I get up on the bed.”

What else?

“It’s good that I can play nicely.”

Follow-up 1 - What are the best things about the other children in your class?

“It’s good that I made new friends with them when I started school.”

What else?

“It’s good they like me and some like playing with me and it’s good that everyone likes me if I play nicely.”

Appendix 14

Ingrid's Transcript

Strategy 1 – Roy the Rabbit Story

Question 1 - Tell me what happened in the story

"He kept growing and growing the carrots until they got fresh and he could eat them."

Question 2 - What was Roy thinking in his head when his carrots weren't ready to pick?

"Thinking that they were big and fresh."

Question 3 - What did Roy do?

"He waited and waited after school."

Question 4 - What do you think Roy really wanted to do?

"Eat them."

Question 5 - What was Roy thinking in his head when he saw the orange tops of the carrots?

"He thought he was going to pick them by himself."

Follow-up 1 – What is the best thing about Roy?

"He liked picking the carrots and eating them."

Strategy 2 – Puppet Scenario

Question 1 - What just happened?

"He forgot his pencil and didn't know where it was."

Question 2 - What is Quackers thinking in his head?

"How to write properly."

Question 3 - What should Quackers do?

"Hide it so that she doesn't know where it is, and that Quackers used it."

Question 4 - What does Quackers want to do?

"Hide it – he can write where it is hid."

Question 5 - What is Quackers thinking now?

"Where is the pencil?"

Question 6 - Why did Quackers give the pencil back?

"Because it wasn't hiding in a good place."

Follow-up 1 - What else could Quackers have done?

"He could have hidden it in a better place like inside his hair."

Follow-up 2 - Why is it good that Quackers gave the pencil back?
“Because then he’ll be able use his own, and they can both have one.”

Strategy 3 – First Day of School Photo

Question 1 - What would you tell this girl about starting school?
“It’s really fun, and you get to do handwriting when you’re a 3 O’clocker.”

Question 2 - What does she need to know?
“What to do.”

Question 3 - What do you think she is thinking on the inside?
“How to be nice to other people.”

Why is she thinking that?
“So she’s a nice girl at school. So you don’t go into the step book, if you don’t know about it you still go in it.”

Follow-up 1 - What would you tell her about getting along with others in the playground?
“You should not push other people over so they get a wee hole in the middle of their hands”

Follow-up 2 - What would you tell him/her about the other children at school?
“You should be nice when you’re doing writing cos you’re not allowed to talk.”

Strategy 4 – Semi-Structured Interview

Question 1 - What is the best thing about you?
“I play nicely, and I like to play nicely, and I like to be a wicked witch.”

Follow-up 1 - What are the best things about the other children in your class?
“They like me doing what I just said.”

Follow-up 2 - What are the best words to describe what sort of person you are?
“Your name so other people know what you’re saying.”

Appendix 15

Charlie's Transcript

Strategy 1 - Roy the Rabbit Story

Question 1 - Tell me what happened in the story

"His mother told him to grow some carrots, they started off as little seeds and they had to wait until the orange tops, and that night they had all the carrots to eat."

Question 2 - What was Roy thinking in his head when his carrots weren't ready to pick?

"Oh the carrots aren't growing. When are they going to grow? When are the green leaves going to show?"

Question 3 - What did Roy do?

"I'm not too sure about that one"

Question 5 - What was Roy thinking in his head when he saw the orange tops of the carrots?

"Oh now I can eat the carrots"

Follow-up 1 – What is the best thing about Roy?

"He's a pink rabbit"

Strategy 2 – Puppet Scenario

Question 1 - What just happened?

"Quackers wants to draw but doesn't have a pencil, but then he went into bunnykins case and stole one."

Question 2 - What is Quackers thinking in his head?

"Rabbit might growl at me cos I stole his pencil."

Question 3 - What should Quackers do?

"Give the pencil back, put it back into the pencil case."

Question 4 - What does Quackers want to do?

"draw."

Question 5 - What is Quackers thinking now?

"Now I can't draw."

Question 6 - Why did Quackers give the pencil back?

"Because Bunnykins might growl."

Follow-up 1 - What else could Quackers have done?

"Leaved it there and gone and got his own pencil."

Strategy 3 – First Day of School Photo

Question 1 - What would you tell this boy about starting school

“Don’t be sad it will be lots of fun.”

What else?

“You can play with me.”

Question 2 - What does he need to know?

“Don’t be naughty.”

Why does he need to know that?

“Because you’ll go in the stepbook or the headmaster’s office.”

Question 3 - What do you think he is thinking on the inside?

“Ok then.”

Follow-up 1 - What would you tell him about getting along with others in the playground?

“Don’t hurt them, just be nice to them.”

Follow-up 2 - What would you tell him about the other children at school

“They are very nice.”

Follow-up 3 - What things can you do to get along with this boy?

“Be very nice.”

Strategy 4 – Semi-Structured Interview

Question 1 - What is the best thing about you?

“I’m a good boy at school.”

What else?

“I’m good at sitting on the mat and focussing. Most of the time I am but sometimes not.”

Anything else?

“I’m good at writing. I’m very funny you know.”

Appendix 16

Emily's Transcript

Strategy 1 – Roy the Rabbit Story

Question 1 - Tell me what happened in the story

"He planted some seeds and at the end he ate them."

Question 2 – What was Roy thinking in his head when his carrots weren't ready to pick?

"That the seeds weren't seeds."

Question 3 - What did Roy do?

"He planted and watered and looked and watered."

Question 4 - What do you think Roy really wanted to do?

"Pick them."

Question 5 - What was Roy thinking in his head when he saw the orange tops of the carrots?

"That they were ready to pick."

Follow-up 1 - What are the best things about Roy?

"He liked it when his carrots were ready to pick"

What else?

"He jumped when they were ready."

Follow-up 2 - What could Roy have done differently?

"Watered."

Strategy 2 – Puppet Scenario

Question 1 - What just happened?

"He picked up Quackers favourite."

Question 2 - What is Bunnykins thinking in his head?

"That he's ready to write."

Question 3 - What should Bunnykins do?

"Give it to him."

Question 4 - What does Bunnykins want to do?

"Writing."

Question 5 - What is Bunnykins thinking now?

"That he needs a pencil."

Question 6 - Why did Bunnykins give the pencil back?

“Because he knew it was his special one.”

Follow-up 1 - What else could Bunnykins have done?

“Chosen another pencil.”

Follow-up 2 - Why would that have been better?

“Because it was very nice.”

Strategy 3 – First Day of School Photo

Question 1 - What would you tell this girl about starting school?

“That it’s very nice.”

Why is it nice?

“Because you get to write.”

Question 2 - What does she need to know?

“How to write letters properly.”

Question 3 - What do you think she is thinking on the inside?

“That she wants to spell words without capital letters in the middle.”

Follow-up 1 - What would you tell her about getting along with others in the playground?

“If she gets lost in another class she’ll go up to the office.”

Follow-up 2 - What would you tell her about the other children at school?

“They’re friendly.”

Anything else?

“They’ll play with her.”

Follow-up 3 - What things can you do to get along with this girl?

“Help her and show her where to go to the toilet.”

Why would you do those things?

“Because it’s very nice.”

Strategy 4 – Semi-Structured Interview

Question 1- What is the best thing about you?

“I made friends.”

What else?

“I can write little letters.”

Follow-up 1 – What is the best thing about the other children in your class?

“Because they can do the same as me.”

Appendix 17

Jimmy's Transcript

Strategy 1 – Roy the Rabbit Story

Question 1 - Tell me what happened in the story

"He went down the road and he found some carrot seeds."

Question 2 - What was Roy thinking in his head when his carrots weren't ready to pick?

"That they weren't ready."

Question 3 - What did Roy do?

"He wanted to eat them."

Question 4 - What do you think Roy really wanted to do?

"Have a carrot supper."

Question 5 - What was Roy thinking in his head when he saw the orange tops of the carrots?

"That they were ready and he was feeling happy."

Follow-up 1 - What is the best thing about Roy?

"That he found some carrots and he could eat them."

Follow-up 2 - What could Roy have done differently?

"Eaten one when it just came out but he needed to wash it first."

Strategy 2 – Puppet Scenario

Question 1 - What just happened?

"He could draw it if he put pencil on the paper."

Question 2 - What is Quackers thinking in his head?

"He didn't steal it."

Question 3 - What should Quackers do?

"Give back the pencil."

Question 4 - What does Quackers want to do?

"Draw."

Question 5 - What is Quackers thinking now?

"That his pencil has gone."

Question 6 - Why did Quackers give the pencil back?

"Because it's nice to do that."

Why

“Because he didn’t mean to steal it he just wanted to write.”

Follow-up 1 - What else could Quackers have done?

“He could have said I’m sorry.”

Strategy 3 – First Day of School Photo

Question 1 - What would you tell this boy about starting school?

“It’s really fun at school.”

Anything else?

“He would need to have a school uniform.”

Question 2 - What does he need to know?

“To be kind to people at school because there’s lots of people.”

Question 3 - What do you think he is thinking on the inside?

“Need to finds some friends to play with.”

Anything else?

“He didn’t know where to go if he hurt himself.”

Follow-up 1 - What would you tell him about getting along with others in the playground?

“To listen to somebody kind not to somebody mean, cos they could take you to the wrong place if you get hurt.”

Follow-up 2 - What would you tell him about the other children at school?

“Some of them aren’t friendly.”

Follow-up 3 - What things can you do to get along with this boy?

“Play with him.”

Strategy 4 – Semi-Structured Interview

Question 1 - What is the best thing about you?

“I know how to write.”

Follow-up 1 - What are the best things about the other children in your class?

“They get to play with me each day, they get to draw.”

Appendix 18

Pippa's Transcript

Strategy 1 – Roy the Rabbit Story

Question 1 - Tell me what happened in the story

“Roy found some carrot seeds on the road when he was walking with his family.”

Question 2 - What was Roy thinking in his head when his carrots weren't ready to pick?

“He was thinking that they could be yummy.”

Question 3 - What did Roy do?

“He watered and planted them.”

Question 4 - What do you think Roy really wanted to do?

“To pick them.”

Question 5 - What was Roy thinking in his head when he saw the orange tops of the carrots?

“Eat them.”

Follow-up 1 - What is the best thing about Roy?

“Because he didn't pick them, he waited until his mum said he could”

Follow-up 2 - What could Roy have done differently?

“He could just play with his toys waiting for the carrots to grow.”

Strategy 2 – Puppet Scenario

Question 1 - What just happened?

“He took that pencil away from him.”

Question 2 - What is Quackers thinking in his head?

“To draw with it.”

Question 3 - What should Quackers do?

“Give it back to him.”

Question 4 - What does Quackers want to do?

“He wants to draw with it. That pencils not even his.”

Question 5 - What is Quackers thinking now?

“That he could find another one.”

Question 6 - Why did Quackers give the pencil back?

“Because it wasn't his.”

Follow-up 1 - What else could Quackers have done?

“Tell him that he took it before he took it.”

Follow-up 2 - Why would that have been better?

“Because then he would know.”

Follow-up 3 - What is the best thing about Quackers?

“Because that he gave it back to him after he was looking for it.”

Strategy 3 – First Day of School Photo

Question 1 - What would you tell this girl about starting school?

“What you do.”

What else?

“That if he did a mistake they would get he teacher and ask, can the new children use a rubber?”

Question 2 – What does she need to know?

“All the words and what makes sense.”

Follow-up 1 - What would you tell her about getting along with others in the playground?

“Playing with new friends.”

Follow-up 2 - What would you tell her about the other children at school?

“Their names. Where their chair is if they didn’t know.”

Follow-up 3 - What things can you do to get along with this girl?

“They could help them.”

Strategy 4 – Semi-Structured Interview

Question 1 - What is the best thing about you?

“We are very good because we can listen.”

What else is a best thing about you?

“Because I know lots of things.”

Appendix 19

Imogen's Transcript

Strategy 1 – Roy the Rabbit Story

Question 1 - Tell me what happened in the story

“Roy wanted to plant the carrot seeds.”

Question 2 - What was Roy thinking in his head when his carrots weren't ready to pick?

“They will never grow.”

Question 3 - What did Roy do?

“He kept looking after them.”

Question 4 - What do you think Roy really wanted to do?

“He wanted to plant the seeds.”

Question 5 - What was Roy thinking in his head when he saw the orange tops of the carrots?

“He was excited.”

Follow-up 1 - What is the best thing about Roy?

“He kept growing the seeds until they grewed.”

Why was that a best thing?

“So they could have their dinner

Strategy 2 – Puppet Scenario

Question 1 - What just happened?

“He took the special pencil.”

Question 2 - What is Bunnykins thinking in his head?

“Don't know.”

Question 3 - What should Bunnykins do?

No answer

Question 4 - What does Bunnykins want to do?

“Ask everyone where his pencil is.”

Question 5 - What is Bunnykins thinking now?

No answer

Question 6 - Why did Bunnykins give the pencil back?

“Because it was his special pencil and he didn't want anyone to touch it.”

Follow-up 1 - What else could Bunnykins have done?

“Asked him – Quackers.”

Follow-up 2 - Why would that have been better?

“Because someone would want to find it, and he couldn’t find it, he would think he’d lost it.”

Strategy 3 – First Day of School Photo

Question 1 - What would you tell this girl about starting school?

“That when there’s 3 bells you just get a drink or go to toilet.”

What else would you tell her?

“You put your lunchbox on the shelf.”

Question 2 - What does she need to know?

“That you can’t go in swimming pool if the teacher says.”

Question 3 - What do you think she is thinking on the inside?

“She doesn’t know what to do everything.”

Strategy 4 – Semi-Structured Interview

Question 1 – What is the best thing about you?

“Because I was sick yesterday and today I’m better.”

What else?

“I eat healthy food.”

Follow-up 1 - What are the best things about the other children in your class?

“It’s [name of child’s] birthday today and she invited me to it.”

Appendix 20

Winston's Transcript

Strategy 1 – Roy the Rabbit Story

Question 1 - Tell me what happened in the story

“Everyday after school he watered and he watered and he looked and looked but it didn’t work, but his mum told him to keep watering, so he did, and then one day the carrots grewed and he ate them.”

Question 2 - What was Roy thinking in his head when his carrots weren’t ready to pick?

“He wished he could pick them.”

Question 3 - What did Roy do?

“Pick the carrots.”

Question 5 - What was Roy thinking in his head when he saw the orange tops of the carrots?

“He really wanted to pick them.”

Follow-up 1 - What is the best thing about Roy?

“He can hide and he can jump really high.”

Follow-up 2 - What could Roy have done differently?

“Dig for carrots.”

Why would that have been better?

“Otherwise he wouldn’t have to wait and wait.”

Strategy 2 – Puppet Scenario

Question 1 - What just happened?

“He got Bunnykins favourite pencil.”

Question 2- What is Quackers thinking in his head?

“I want to do some writing.”

Question 3 - What should Quackers do?

“Took his favourite pencil, he should give it back.”

Question 4 - What does Quackers want to do?

“Write.”

Question 5 - What is Quackers thinking now?

“Want to get it back.”

Question 6 - Why did Quackers give the pencil back?

“Because it was his favourite pencil.”

Follow-up 1 - What else could Quackers have done?

“Put it back in the hole.”

Follow-up 2 - Why would that have been better?

“So he didn’t have to look everywhere.”

Strategy 3 – First Day of School Photo

Question 1 - What would you tell this boy about starting school?

“Don’t be worried about all the children.”

Question 2 - What does he need to know?

“How do you read words.”

Question 3 - What do you think he is thinking on the inside?

“Wished he could go in the pool.”

Follow-up 1 - What would you tell him about getting along with others in the playground?

“Ask people, be nice and ask people.”

Follow-up 2 - What would you tell him about the other children at school?

“Some are big so you need to be a wee bit careful.”

Follow-up 3 - What things can you do to get along with this boy?

“Play easy games.”

What else?

“Play with some friends so he gets more people to play with.”

Strategy 4 – Semi-Structured Interview

Question 1 - What is the best thing about you?

“Playing soccer.”

What else?

“Swimming and monkey bars the yellow ones.”

Follow-up 1 - What are the best things about the other children in your class?

“They play running races and tag.”

Appendix 21

Gemma's Transcript

Strategy 1 – Roy the Rabbit Story

Question 1 - Tell me what happened in the story

"He found some carrot seeds."

What else?

"He needed to wait until he could see orange tops."

Question 2 - What was Roy thinking in his head when his carrots weren't ready to pick?

"To pick the carrots to see if they were ready."

Question 3 - What did Roy do?

"He watered the plants."

Question 4 – "What do you think Roy really wanted to do?"

"Eat the carrots."

Question 5 – What was Roy thinking in his head when he saw the orange tops of the carrots?

"To pick them."

Strategy 2 – Puppet Scenario

Question 1 - What just happened?

"Quackers took the pencil without asking."

Question 2 - What is Quackers thinking in his head?

"To write with it and not tell him."

Question 3 - What should Quackers do?

"Go and tell him that he has his pen."

Question 4- What does Quackers want to do?

"Write with it"

Question 5 - What is Quackers thinking now?

"Next time he takes things he should ask."

Question 6 - Why did Quackers give the pencil back?

"Because the bunny was looking for it."

Follow-up 1 - What else could Quackers have done?

"Asked him."

Strategy 3 – First Day of School Photo

Question 1 - What would you tell this girl about starting school?

“School is very fun.”

Question 2 - What does she need to know?

“To sit on the mat quietly.”

Question 3 - What do you think she is thinking on the inside?

“She’s a bit scared.”

Strategy 4 – Semi-Structured Interview

Question 1 - What are the best things about you?

“I can play on the monkey bars very well.”

Anything else?

“I’m a very good thing”

Appendix 22

Jane's Transcript

Strategy 1 – Roy the Rabbit Story

Question 1 - Tell me what happened in the story

"Roy wanted to get some carrots."

Question 2 - What was Roy thinking in his head when his carrots weren't ready to pick?

"He had to get them after school."

Question 3 - What did Roy do?

"He had to keep on watching."

Question 4 - What do you think Roy really wanted to do?

"He wanted to go and play."

Question 5 - What was Roy thinking in his head when he saw the orange tops of the carrots?

"He had to pull them out."

Follow-up 1 - What is the best thing about Roy?

"He's a rabbit."

What else?

"He got the carrots."

Strategy 2 – Puppet Scenario

Question 1 - What just happened?

"He wanted to do some writing and didn't have a pencil."

So what did he do?

"He went and got one."

Question 2 - What is Bunnykins thinking in his head?

No answer

Question 3 - What should Bunnykins do?

"Should give Quackers the pencil back."

Question 4 - What does Bunnykins want to do?

"He wants to write with it."

Question 5 - What is Bunnykins thinking now?

"He wants to get a different pencil."

Question 6 - Why did Bunnykins give the pencil back?

“Because it was Quacks.”

Follow-up 1 - What else could Bunnykins have done?

“Got a different one.”

Follow-up 2 - Why would that have been better?

“Then he wouldn’t be grumpy.”

Strategy 3 – First Day of School Photo

Question 1 - What would you tell this girl about starting school?

“Don’t know.”

Question 2 - What does she need to know?

“It’s fun.”

Strategy 4 – Semi-Structured Interview

Question 1 - What is the best thing about you?

“I can do some puzzles.”

What else?

“I can play with my brother and sister.”

Anything else?

“I can play games with mummy and daddy.”

Follow-up 1 - What are the best things about the other children in your class?

“They’re friendly.”

Anything else?

“I know them.”

Appendix 23

Sarah's Transcript

Strategy 1 – Roy the Rabbit Story

Question 1 - Tell me what happened in the story

"Roy got some beans and they grew to become real carrots and he ate them for dinner."

Question 2 - What was Roy thinking in his head when his carrots weren't ready to pick?

"He was thinking they wouldn't grow."

Why was he thinking that?

"They're not coming up and he wanted to eat."

Question 3- What did Roy do?

"He picked them when they were ready and then he'll be able to eat them and he's happy."

Question 4 - What do you think Roy really wanted to do?

"He really wanted to eat them, and he nearly wanted to dig the ground and he planted the seeds so they'd grow into big vegetables."

Question 5 - What was Roy thinking in his head when he saw the orange tops of the carrots?

"He wanted to pick them and he did and he had them for tea."

Follow-up 2 - What could Roy have done differently?

"If he had lots and lots of vegetables he would have to put up signs but he only put one up for carrots."

Strategy 2 – Puppet Scenario

Question 1 - What just happened?

"He could get a pencil and do some writing."

Where from?

"Out of the pencil case."

Question 2 - What is Bunnykins thinking in his head?

"What he could draw."

Question 3 - What should Bunnykins do?

"Give it to him."

Question 4 - What does Bunnykins want to do?

"He wants to keep it."

Question 5 - What is Bunnykins thinking now?

“Where he could find another pencil.”

Question 6 - Why did Bunnykins give the pencil back?

“Because it’s his.”

Follow-up 1 - What else could Bunnykins have done?

“He could have taken a pen.”

Strategy 3 – First Day of School Photo

Question 1 -What would you tell this girl about starting school?

“She would turn 5, and if she’s scared she can ask her teacher or ask a friend to come play with her, and she doesn’t have any friends yet and she comes for school visits.”

Question 2 - What does she need to know?

“How to learn to do stuff. To find her own friends so they can be her friends.”

Question 3 - What do you think she is thinking on the inside?

“What could I do to make new friends? I could go up to talk to them and they could be my friend.”

Follow-up 1 - What would you tell her about getting along with others in the playground?

“She would go and say ‘would you please come and play with me?’”

Follow-up 3 - What things can you do to get along with this girl?

“Say ‘I don’t have any friends either can you play with me?’”

Strategy 4 – Semi-Structured Interview

Question 1 - What is the best thing about you?

“I get to play with my bestest friend.”

What else?

“I always like playing with my friends. If they don’t have anyone to play with I will play with them.”

Follow-up 1 - What are the best things about the other children in your class?

“They always play with people when they’re sad. When they’re real sad they say ‘come on you can play with me.’”

Appendix 24

Timothy's Transcript

Strategy 1 – Roy the Rabbit Story

Question 1 - Tell me what happened in the story

“He planted some carrots and he kept on watering them.”

Question 2 - What was Roy thinking in his head when his carrots weren't ready to pick?

“They will never grow.”

Question 3 - What did Roy do?

“He kept on watering them everyday and they never came up.”

Question 4 - What do you think Roy really wanted to do?

“To play with his friends.”

Question 5 - What was Roy thinking in his head when he saw the orange tops of the carrots?

“He was really happy because he could play with his friends now.”

Follow-up 2 - What could Roy have done differently?

“Watered it one day and the next he doesn't need to do it.”

Strategy 2 – Puppet Scenario

Question 1 - What just happened?

“He didn't have a pencil so he took Bunnykicks pencil.”

Question 2 - What is Quackers thinking in his head?

“That he might steal it.”

Question 3 - What should Quackers do?

“Bunnykins doesn't have a pencil, he should write first, then give it back.”

Question 4 - What does Quackers want to do?

“He wants to write first.”

Question 5 - What is Quackers thinking now?

“He is thinking he should give it back once he's finished.”

Question 6 - Why did Quackers give the pencil back?

“It's not his pencil.”

Follow-up 1 - What else could Quackers have done?

“He could have got another pencil.”

Strategy 3 – First Day of School Photo

Question 1 - What would you tell this boy about starting school?

“That it’s ok if you’re scared, because if you fall over we will help you.”

Question 2 - What does he need to know?

“That it’s ok to be scared.”

Question 3 - What do you think he is thinking on the inside?

“It’s ok if he starts school because the teacher will look after him and we will help him too.”

Follow-up 1 - What would you tell him about getting along with others in the playground?

“If somebody pushes you over we will take you to the office if you’re bleeding.”

Follow-up 3 - What things can you do to get along with this boy?

“I could help him a lot.”

Strategy 4 – Semi-Structured Interview

Question 1 - What is the best thing about you?

“I help people when they fall over.”

Anything else?

“When some boys are chasing after girls I tell them don’t.”

Follow-up 1 - What are the best things about the other children in your class?

“They help me when I’m falling over.”

Appendix 25

Megan's Transcript

Strategy 1 – Roy the Rabbit Story

Question 1 - Tell me what happened in the story

“Roy planted some seeds.”

Question 2 - What was Roy thinking in his head when his carrots weren't ready to pick?

“That it will take forever.”

Question 3 - What did Roy do?

“He watched and watered them.”

Question 4 - What do you think Roy really wanted to do?

“Pick them.”

Question 5 - What was Roy thinking in his head when he saw the orange tops of the carrots?

“He could pick them. They were ready.”

Follow-up 1 - What is the best thing about Roy?

“That he listened to his mum.”

Strategy 2 – Puppet Scenario

Question 1 - What just happened?

“He took Quackers pencil .”

Question 2 - What is Bunnykins thinking in his head?

“That he's allowed to use and Quackers won't mind.”

Question 3 - What should Bunnykins do?

“Go to Quackers and say sorry for taking it and give it back.”

Question 4 - What does Bunnykins want to do?

“Just wants to steal it and write.”

Question 5 - What is Bunnykins thinking now?

“To get another pencil.”

Question 6 - Why did Bunnykins give the pencil back?

“Because he wants to be nice.”

Follow-up 1 - What else could Bunnykins have done?

“Asked for it.”

Follow-up 2 - Why would that have been better?

"It's being nice."

Strategy 3 – First Day of School Photo

Question 1 - What would you tell this girl about starting school?

"It will be fun because you get to learn lots of things."

What else?

"You still get to play because you get some time after food."

Question 2 - What does she need to know?

"When she first starts she'll be a 1'o'clocker."

Question 3 - What do you think she is thinking on the inside?

"That it might be a bit boring when she's learning."

Follow-up 1 - What would you tell her about getting along with others in the playground?

"When you find some new friends it will be fun to play with them at play time."

Follow-up 3 - What things can you do to get along with this girl?

"I can play with her at play time."

Why would you do that?

"Because she'll be the new girl."

Strategy 4 – Semi-Structured Interview

Question 1 - What is the best thing about you?

"I'm a great friend. I look after the fish I've got at Nanna's."

Anything else?

"I'm nice."

Follow-up 1 - What are the best things about the other children in your class?

"I have lots of the girls to be friends with, and sometimes the boys play with the girls."

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Joshua's Transcript

Strategy 1 – Roy the Rabbit Story

Question 1 - Tell me what happened in the story

"Roy wanted to go and pick the carrots but they weren't ready, but he saw green but he didn't know but he found it out. Then the orange tops came and he could pick them."

Question 2 - What was Roy thinking in his head when his carrots weren't ready to pick?

"He so much wanted them to grow. He was saying in his mind he just wants them to grow."

Question 3 - What did Roy do?

"He watered them and watched them."

Question 4 - What do you think Roy really wanted to do?

"Pick them."

Question 5 - What was Roy thinking in his head when he saw the orange tops of the carrots?

"Yay! They're ready."

Follow-up 1 - What is the best thing about Roy?

"He's a happy rabbit."

Follow-up 2 - What could Roy have done differently?

"Brought some from the store."

Strategy 2 – Puppet Scenario

Question 1 - What just happened?

"Bunnykins takes his pencil away because that's his favourite one."

Question 2 - What is Bunnykins thinking in his head?

"I can write."

Question 3 - What should Bunnykins do?

"Give it to him, if he doesn't want to be very scared."

Question 4 - What does Bunnykins want to do?

"Write with the pencil."

Question 5 - What is Bunnykins thinking now?

"Where will I find a pencil?"

Question 6 - Why did Bunnykins give the pencil back?

"Because he didn't want to very scared."

Why would he be very scared?

“Because it’s not going to be very fun.”

Follow-up 1 - What else could Bunnykins have done?

“Gotten a different pencil.”

Follow-up 2 - Why would that have been better?

“Because he’s very nice.”

Strategy 3 – First Day of School Photo

Question 1 - What would you tell this boy about starting school?

“You’ll need to be very quiet.”

Anything else?

“You’ll need to listen to the teacher.”

Question 2 - What does he need to know?

“What his numbers are. Cos he might be asked 4+4 and he might say bunny.”

Question 3 - What do you think he is thinking on the inside?

“I want it to be very good. If it’s not it won’t be very good.”

Follow-up 1 - What would you tell him about getting along with others in the playground?

“Be very nice because if you don’t they won’t be very nice.”

Follow-up 3 - What things can you do to get along with this boy?

“Play games.”

What else?

“Help him if he’s hurt. Tell him what you need to need to do in the playground.”

Why does he need to know what to do in the playground?

“Because it’s the school rules and if he does bad stuff he might be in the step books.”

Strategy 4 – Semi-Structured Interview

Question 1 - What is the best thing about you?

“I have thousands and hundreds and millions of friends.”

What else?

“I’m really really nice to [name of child], he’s the nicest to me and I’m the nicest to him.”

Follow-up 1 - What are the best things about the other children in your class?

“They’re very nice, especially [name of child], each party when he’s had my phone number he’s invited me to his party.”

Appendix 27

Fergus' Transcript

Strategy 1 – Roy the Rabbit Story

Question 1 - Tell me what happened in the story

"Once he said he didn't want to do it anymore, but his father said 'you keep watching them and they will grow', and they did."

Question 2 - What was Roy thinking in his head when his carrots weren't ready to pick?

"Maybe it wouldn't work."

Question 3 - What did Roy do?

"Kept waiting and watering them."

Question 4 - What do you think Roy really wanted to do?

"Pick them."

Question 5 - What was Roy thinking in his head when he saw the orange tops of the carrots?

"He could pick them now."

Follow-up 1 - What is the best thing about Roy?

"He knows how to plant, and he keeps watering the plants because then they would grow."

Follow-up 2 - What could Roy have done differently?

"Waited until the orange bits came, and kept watering or just kept watching."

Strategy 2 – Puppet Scenario

Question 1 - What just happened?

"He stole the other ones pencil."

Question 2 - What is Quackers thinking in his head?

"He's wanting to write."

Question 3 - What should Quackers do?

"Put it back and ask can I do it after you?"

Question 4 - What does Quackers want to do?

"Write."

Question 5 - What is Quackers thinking now?

"He wants to write."

Question 6 - Why did Quackers give the pencil back?

"Because it wasn't his."

Follow-up 1 - What else could Quackers have done?

“Asked.”

Follow-up 2 - Why would that have been better?

“Then they would know that they’d done it. Ask then they might say yes, they think they might have lost it so you can’t steal it you have to ask.”

Strategy 3 – First Day of School Photo

Question 1 - What would you tell this boy about starting school?

“Be good or you won’t get presents.”

Question 2 - What does he/she need to know?

“How to use/hold scissors on the bottom.”

What else?

“Not to push people over and not to steal.”

Question 3 - What do you think he is thinking on the inside?

“I think I’m going to be very good.”

Follow-up 1 - What would you tell him about getting along with others in the playground?

“Play with them, and I’ll be playing with you too.”

Follow-up 2 - What would you tell him about the other children at school?

“They’re very good.”

Follow-up 3 - What things can you do to get along with this boy?

“Play in the playground with him, or maybe go on the monkey bars or play passes or busted.”

Why would you do that?

“Because he might want to play them too.”

Strategy 4 – Semi-Structured Interview

Question 1 - What is the best thing about you?

“I know how to play with people very nicely.”

What else?

“I like playing with other people who I meet.”

Follow-up 1 - What are the best things about the other children in your class?

“That they don’t like me.”

Tables

Table 1.

Difference Between Constructs

Construct	Examples	Associated Developmental Outcomes	Example research study
Risk Factors	Child abuse, poverty, harsh parenting, family conflict, maternal mental illness.	Poor developmental outcomes (Drop-out of school, special education placement, peer rejection).	Sameroff and Seifer
Resilience Factors (Protective Factors)	Easy-going temperament, positive self-concept, external support, good health, secure attachments, academic achievement.	Good developmental outcomes from adverse circumstances (School completion, not in jail, employed).	Werner (1989)
Developmental Assets	Community resources, high parent expectation, constructive use of time, achievement motivation, integrity, planning and decision making skills.	Healthy development, well-being (thriving).	Scales, Benson, Leffert and Blyth
Character Strengths	Kindness, hope, zest, love of learning, curiosity, gratitude, integrity, persistence, humour.	Optimal development, Life satisfaction.	Park, Peterson and Seligman (2004)

Table 2.

Description of Participants

Child Name	Age at Time of Interview	Gender	Time Since Started School	Teacher Comments About Language
Charlie	5 years, 5 months, 28 days	Male	5 months, 28 days	Confident; oral language is a strength
Emily	5 years, 6 months, 13 days	Female	6 months, 13 days	
Fergus	6 years, 20 days	Male	10 months	May not be able to always use correct language required
Gemma	5 years, 8 months, 13 days	Female	8 months, 8 days	
Imogen	5 years, 7 months, 11 days	Female	7 months, 11 days	Quietly spoken and shy in front of the whole class
Ingrid	5 years, 5 months, 19 days	Female	5 months, 19 days	Excellent oral skills with good eye contact, thoughts are clearly articulated
Jake	5 years, 5 months, 18 days	Male	5 months, 18 days	Takes time to process his thoughts before speaking; processing time sometimes means he forgets the beginning of a sequence
Jimmy	5 years, 6 months, 15 days	Male	6 months, 15 days	May need prompting
Jane	5 years, 9 months, 12 days	Female	9 months, 10 days	Likes to converse with adults

Joshua	6 years, 11 days	Male	10 months, 0 days	Sentence structure and vocab well developed, thinks logically and clearly
Megan	5 years, 11 months, 11 days	Female	9 months, 11 days	Just the articulation problems exist but this has not affected her learning
Phoebe	5 years, 5 months, 16 days	Female	5 months, 16 days	Usually speaks in a very timid voice
Pippa	5 years, 7 months, 2 days	Female	7 months, 2 days	Simple sentences
Sarah	5 years, 9 months, 12 days	Female	9 months 10 days	Constructs sentences that have an element of 'adult' talk in them
Timothy	5 years, 11 months, 2 days	Male	10 months, 0 days	May need prompting
Wylie	5 years, 5 months, 10 days	Male	5 months, 10 days	Has well-developed oral language skills; detailed conversations due to extensive world-wide travel. In his element when explaining events or thoughts. Logical sequence evident
Winston	5 years, 7 months, 28 days	Male	7 months, 22 days	Oral language is a strength

Table 3.

Summary of Character Strengths Identified in Children's Responses

Character Strength	Total Number of Children who Referred to Character Strength	Total Number of References to Character Strength	Total Number of References to Self	Total Number of References to Others
Affiliation	11	24	18	6
Independence	1	1	0	1
Kindness	10	23	13	10
Optimism	2	2	0	2
Patience	2	2	0	2
Perseverance	4	5	0	5
Responsibility	2	2	1	1
Self-Regulation	8	11	2	9
Humour	1	1	1	0
Justice/fairness	1	1	1	0

Figures

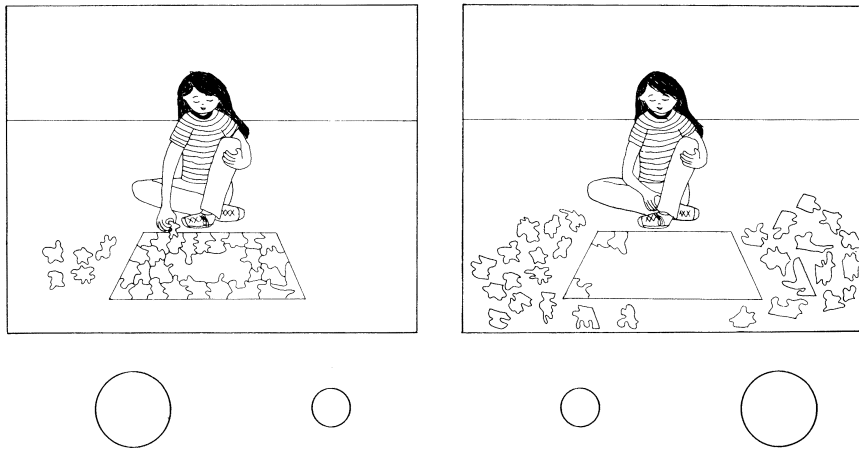


Figure 1. Example of an item from the Pictorial Scale of Perceived Competence and Social Acceptance

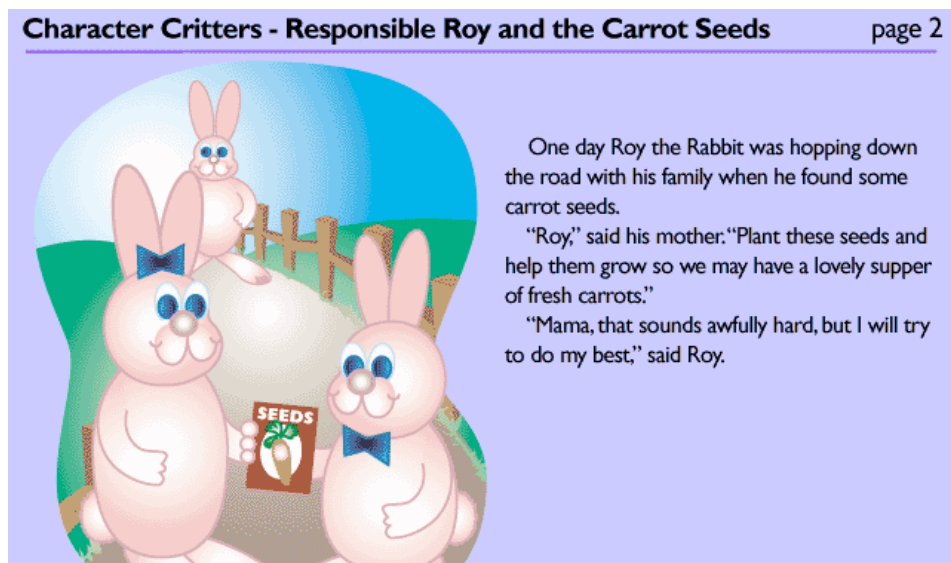


Figure 2. Example of a page from “Roy the Responsible Rabbit”



Figure 3. Teddy Bears used in the Toy Scenario (left Miggy Bear; right, Yoji Bear)



Figure 4. Photo used in the Pilot Study for the Starting School Strategy

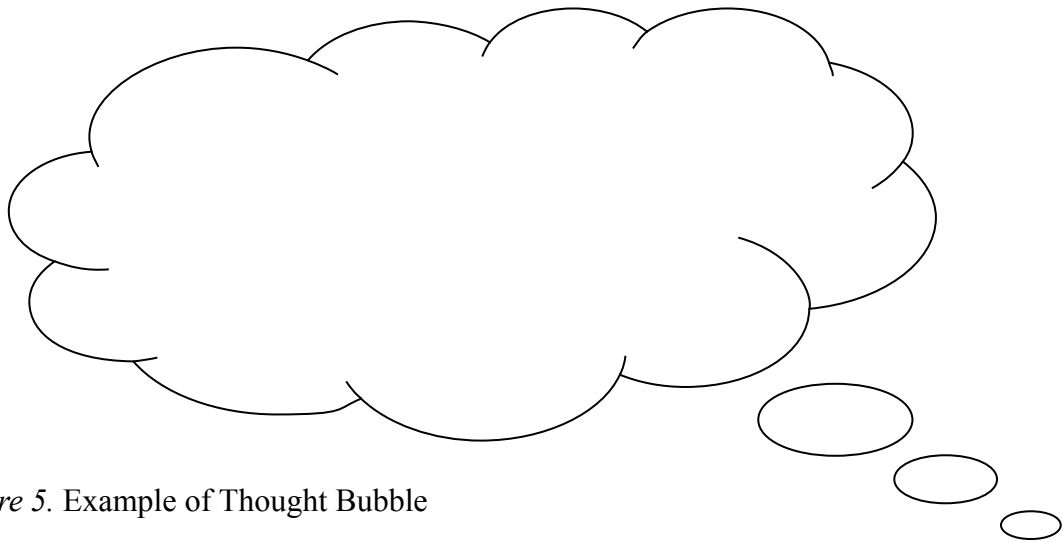


Figure 5. Example of Thought Bubble



Figure 6. Puppets used in the Puppet Scenario (left, Bunnykins; right, Quackers)



Figure 7. Photo used in Main Study for the First Day of School Strategy

